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Ask Away: Digital Infrastructure for a 21st Century Democracy

To what extent can design
facilitate youth political
engagement?

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

The number of young people turning out to vote is declining in Western democracies (Sheerin, 2007; Donald, 2010). This issue is symptomatic of the growing gap between traditional political systems and the 21st century citizen. However, the emergence of internet technology makes large-scale participation easier, which presents an opportunity to change citizens' relationship with government (Tapscott in Gormley, 2009). This research applies design processes to the way young people engage with candidates in elections. It suggests that an online platform can be an effective piece of infrastructure for alternative political participation.

Ask Away is an open source question and answer web application for people to ask questions, vote for the ones they want answered and then compare responses from political candidates. Through participating on *Ask Away*, citizens are able to engage candidates in direct dialogue, shape discussions and set agendas.

Human-centred, collaborative design thinking and making were used to develop the platform, which was used by 22,000 New Zealanders in the period leading up to the 2014 New Zealand General Election.

Learning through doing was core to this research. By designing, creating and releasing a working prototype, this thesis not only makes a proposition, but demonstrates the impact initiatives like this can have on civic participation.

Key Words

Political participation
Political engagement
Political efficacy
Transformational Design
Human-centred design
User experience design
Civic tech
Open source
Online engagement
Two way communication
Social media

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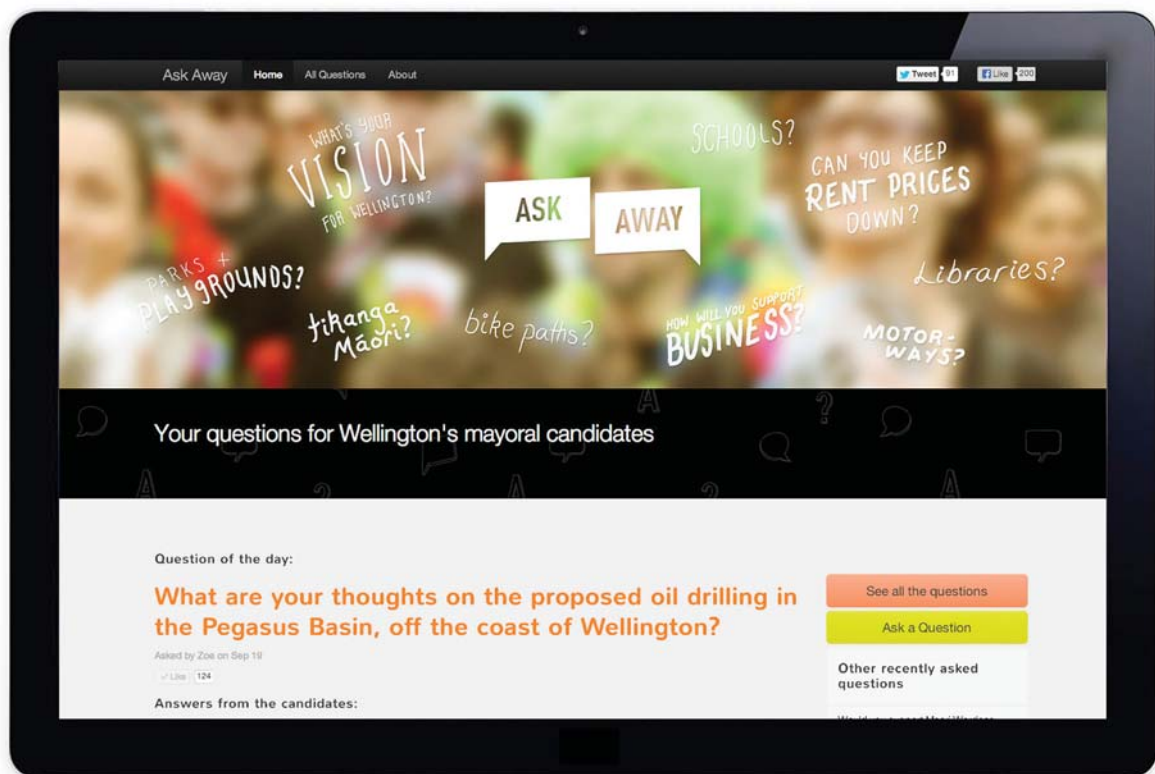


Figure 1: Ask Away Beta in 2013 — Mayoral Elections.

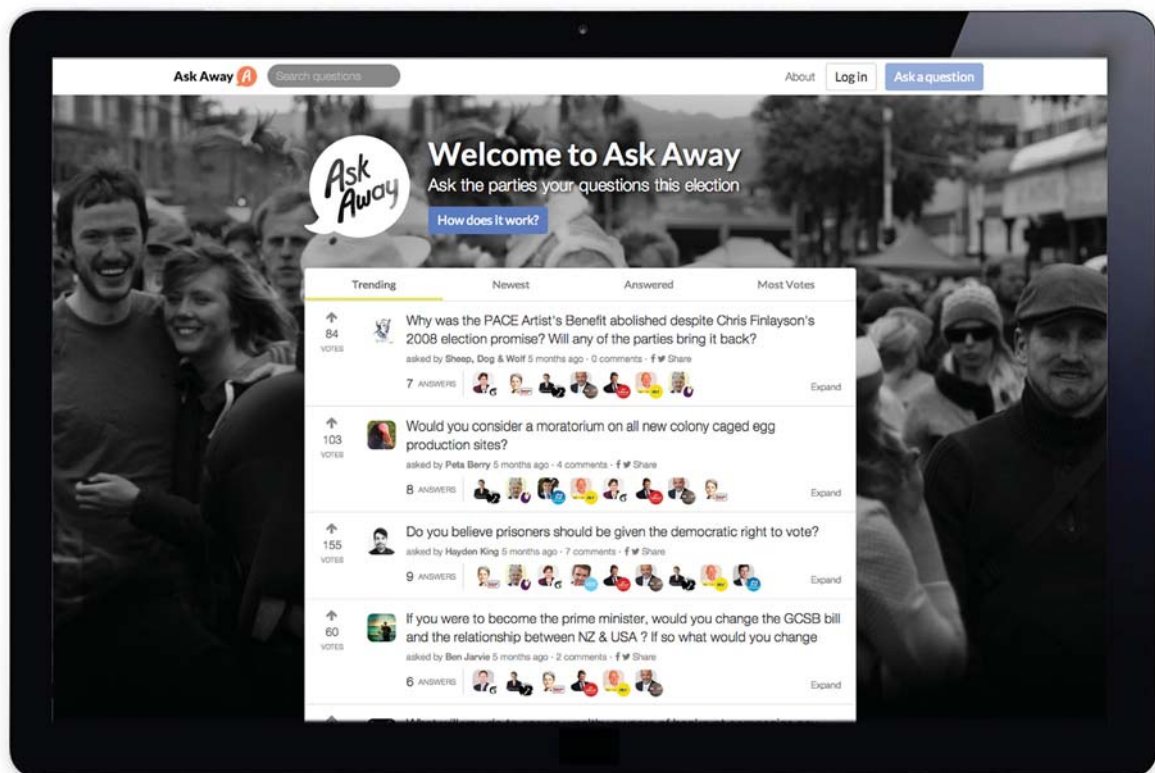


Figure 2: Ask Away homepage in 2014.

Introduction

The *Ask Away* platform was first designed, prototyped and used in the Wellington Mayoral election in 2013, as my BDes Honours major project in Visual Communication Design. This next iteration involved expanding the scope of the platform to a nation-wide, youth focussed tool for voter motivation — a goal broader in scope but more targeted in audience.

Voter turnout as a percentage of eligible population rose by 3% in 2014, halting a trend that would have seen it dropping another 5% (New Zealand Electoral Commission, 2015). According to Professor Jack Vowles of Victoria University, turnout among 18-29 year olds rose by 5-8%. Vowles suggested the increase may be due to increased activity encouraging turnout, from both parties and “other groups, particularly youth groups” (Blake-Kelly & Whelan, 2015, para. 7).

Although it is impossible to prove a causal relationship between the *Ask Away* initiative and overall turnout, the high level of engagement it received is a positive sign. There were more than 1000 questions and 1000 answers exchanged on the platform, with hundreds of comments and 16,000 votes cast across the questions.

Declining youth voter turnout

Voter turnout has declined in New Zealand in almost every general election since 1984 (Figure 3). This trend is observable in most Western democracies, and worldwide it is young people who are consistently under-represented at the polls (Sheerin, 2007; Donald, 2010). According to the Statistics New Zealand *General Social Survey*, 42% of 18-24 year olds did not vote in the 2011

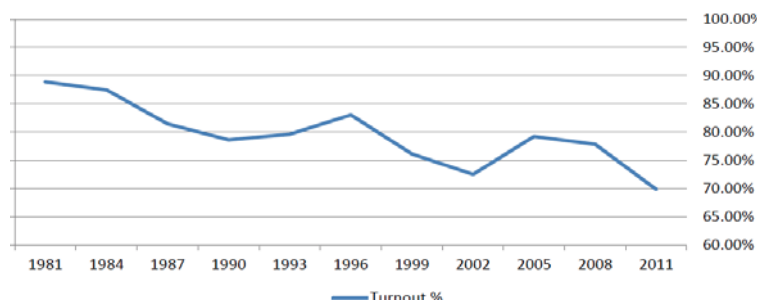


Figure 3: Electoral Commission. 2014. *New Zealand General Election Turnout by voting age population 1981-2011*. Graph.

General Election, compared to a national average of 20% (2014).

Youth are the focus of this thesis, but there are other groups who are over-represented in non-voting statistics. These groups include recent migrants, Māori and Pasifika peoples, and those who are unemployed or on low incomes. The latter group in particular has a large crossover with youth (Statistics NZ, 2014; Fitzgerald, Stevenson & Tapiata, 2007).

If non-voters were spread evenly across the population, it would make little difference how many people voted, so long as proportionally, everyone was accurately represented in the result. However, alongside the trend of youth non-voting has come a self-reinforcing ‘cycle of mutual neglect’ (Shea & Green, 2007, p. 167). Because they believe young people are not interested, political parties rarely pitch policies or mobilisation campaigns at youth. As a result, youth do not pay attention to political parties and messages. This means that when policy platforms are decided, the needs and preferences of young people risk being left out.

Civic technology

As democracy faces the challenge of youth non-voting, it is also presented with opportunities. The tools of the internet mean that for the first time gathering opinions and sharing information is not prohibited by financial cost and this enables new forms of political participation (Breuer & Farooq, 2012). The relationship between technology and democracy is quickly evolving, and this project can be situated within this dynamic space.

Along with many others internationally, the New Zealand public sector has been working towards digital transformation. This effort focuses on not only delivering services digitally, but designing them around the needs of users. The Department of Internal Affairs' *Result 10 Blueprint* (2014), a roadmap for change in service delivery across government, recognises the importance of design thinking and human-centred methods to effect these changes.

While this transformation is underway within many government agencies, it has not yet made its way into the democratic process. However, the role of digital and particularly social media in political campaigns, has been growing rapidly (Loader & Mercea, 2012). Political parties in New Zealand now commonly use Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, as well as party and candidate websites, as channels for political communication. These platforms are forms of **social media**, which is defined as “various user-driven (inbound marketing) channels. These channels represent a stark difference from the advertiser-driven (outbound marketing) push model” (Burgess cited in Cohen, 2011, para. 8).

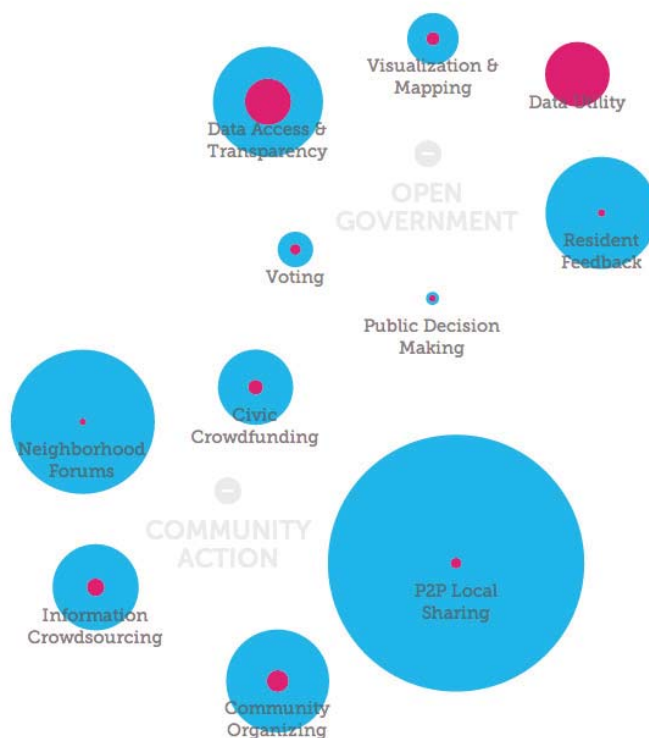


Figure 4. The Knight Foundation. 2013a. *Mapping the Civic Technology Landscape*. Interactive web visualisation.

The growing use of social media sets an expectation for candidates to be engaging online. Some parties have moved beyond simply using social media as another channel for spreading their messages, and have used the web to facilitate policy discussion and decentralised campaign organisation. For example, the newly formed Internet Party used an open source platform, Loomio, to allow users to collaboratively create its policy platform for the 2014 election (Internet Party, 2014).

Alongside these changes within government and political parties, there is a developing movement of initiatives loosely termed ‘civic tech’. As illustrated in the map of the civic tech landscape below it is a term that covers a large range of activities, including ‘facilitating civic engagement’ under voting. Civic tech has been described as

“technology that spurs citizen engagement, improves cities and makes governments more effective” by the Knight Foundation, which funds civic projects in the United States (Knight Foundation, 2013b, para. 1).

Linked to civic tech is the Open Source movement. Open source software is “software that can be freely used, changed, and shared (in modified or unmodified form) by anyone” (Open Source Initiative, n.d., para.1). It offers cost-cutting and time-saving advantages technically, and also contains some entrenched philosophical principles. One of these is that technology can be an enabler for participation at every level. Open source’s focus on open participation and transparency resonate closely with the objectives of civic tech. For this as well as practical reasons many civic tech projects develop their platforms under open source licences, as did this project. This licence means that others could use the code and host their own *Ask Away* platform. They could modify or add to the platform, and those improvements could be fed back into use in New Zealand.

Around open source and civic tech projects exist communities of self-described ‘civic hackers’. According to a community member, “Civic hacking is people working together quickly and creatively to help improve government” (Levitas, 2013). ‘Quickly’ recognises that while the public sector are often working on long term, high level strategies to address problems; there can be a lot of value to be had from light-weight, flexible solutions largely built by volunteers. These people are mostly web developers, but increasingly include designers, public servants and subject matter experts. In the case of this project, fifteen

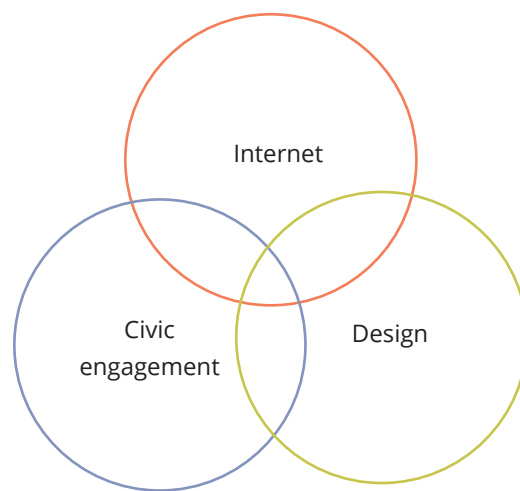


Figure 5. *Contextual lenses.*

web developers contributed code, some remotely, during a series of group sessions in evenings or on weekends.

Together these movements set the context for this project. Participation and openness are common themes in the activity emerging in the space between technology and civic engagement. It is fertile ground for solutions that enable people to take part by putting them at the centre. While the public sector is introducing a human-centred approach and civic technology projects aim to enable citizen participation, there is a gap for citizen-led projects that employ human-centred design. In particular, this approach has not been studied in the field of voter participation (beyond voting systems design), in New Zealand or internationally. This research therefore explores both the potential impact of design in the field of voter participation, and also the application of human-centred design in the realm of civic technology.

Paradigms

Research question:

To what extent could an online platform increase youth voter engagement and participation in the 2014 General Election?

More specifically, can *Ask Away*, an interactive web platform originally designed and prototyped to facilitate participation and two-way dialogue between young voters and candidates leading up to the 2013 Wellington Local Body elections, be extended to a national election campaign environment? What can be achieved with a broader scope and limited time frame? How can this differentiate from the work of others working in this space, for example *Ask Them, Our-Say, On the Fence* and *Reddit* (see Appendix One). What techniques can be used to facilitate youth voter engagement online and does this lead to more young people voting?

Secondly, what role can design play in citizen-initiated civic engagement projects?

What does a design led civic technology project look like and how can a human-centred approach facilitate collaboration?

Because a change from political disengagement to active participation is the underlying goal of this research, it sits within the paradigm of **Transformational Design**. This is a mode of design that addresses complex social and economic problems and “asks designers to shape behaviour – of people, systems and organisations – as well as form” (Burns, Cottam, Vanstone & Winhall, 2006, p. 21). This definition comes from 2006 paper by the Research and Development (RED) team at the UK Design Council. It has its roots in Pine and Gilmore’s (1999) description of transformational offerings as the next stage of economic progression. In this work, change within the individual (such as weight loss or an increase in fitness) is the deliverable. Working across disciplines, the role of the transformational designer “is less the sole author of ideas, and more the facilitator of others’ ideas” (Burns et al., 2006, p. 26).

A closely connected paradigm is **human-centred design**. Human-centred design (HCD) considers the end user of a product or service to be central to the design process. HCD stresses the value of collaboration between diverse perspectives and a holistic, iterative and multidisciplinary approach to creating solutions (IDEO, 2013). A fundamental shift in human-centred design is the change in focus from ‘Master Designer’ to ‘Expert User’, the acknowledgement that people have the best knowledge about their own situations (Burns et al., 2006, p.6, p.10). This shift echoes Transformational Design’s positioning of the designer as facilitator rather than expert.

Processes

This project draws on three processes that can be utilised to resolve a research question by placing the user at the centre and working iteratively:

(i) Design thinking:

As described by Bailey (2014) design thinking codifies the design process in a way that communicates with non-designers as well as designers, for example within business schools. The design thinking process starts with time spent understanding the needs of users, followed by definition of the problem or goals. Initial research has a broad scope, then is refined into specific insights or a problem statement. From this defined point, designers 'go wide' again, generating diverse ideas before again narrowing focus to a specific solution. Concepts are then quickly prototyped and tested and further developed. Whatever scope or situation the design process is occurring within, these rhythms of divergent and convergent thinking consistently emerge, a pattern described by the Design Council as the 'double diamond' (2005).

(ii) User experience design:

User experience design is a specifically technology-focused process "concerned

with all the elements that together make up that interface, including layout, visual design, text, brand, sound, and interaction. UE [UX] works to coordinate these elements to allow for the best possible interaction by users" (User Experience Professionals Association, n.d.). It draws from the fields of cognitive science and behavioural psychology to explain user behaviour and maximise ease of use (UXPA, n.d.).

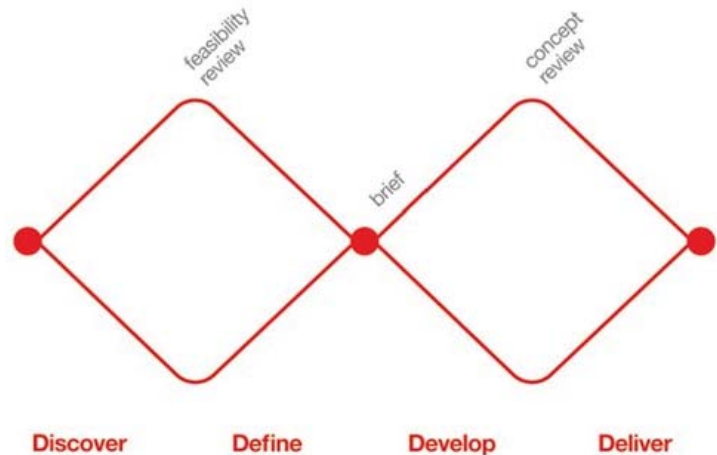
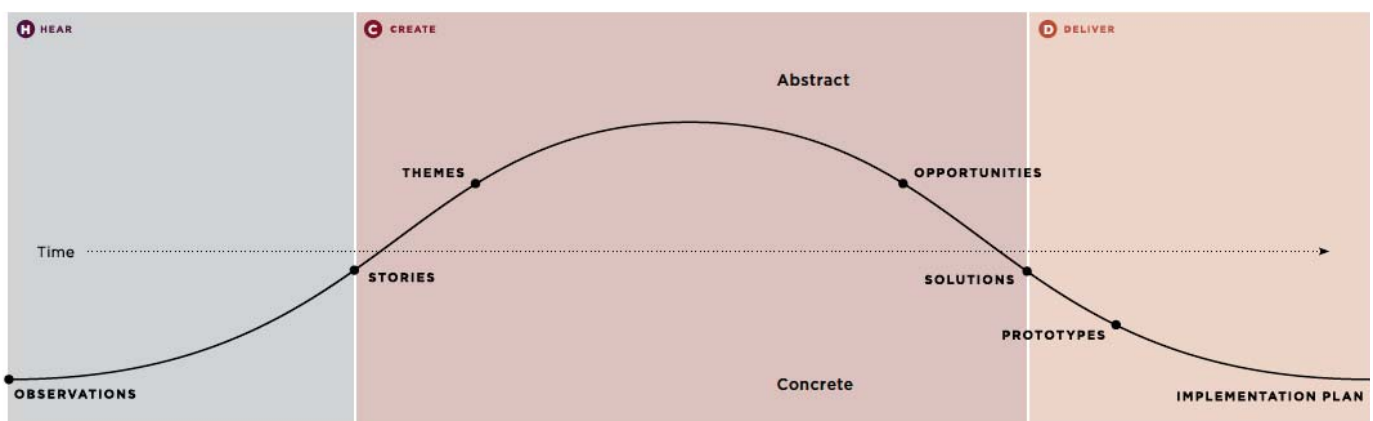


Figure 6. Design Council, 2005. *The design process*. Diagram.

Figure 7. IDEO, 2009. *The HCD process*. Diagram.



User-centred design is a subset of human-centred design often used for UX. Unlike HCD, it is limited in scope to ‘end users’ rather than stakeholders and collaborators (Di Russo, 2012). **User engagement** is a facet of UX defined by cognitive scientist Mounia Lalmas from Yahoo Labs as “the emotional, cognitive and behavioural connection that exists... between a user and a technological resource” (2013, Slide 9). This thesis takes particular interest in this connection and its potential impact on political engagement.

(iii) Agile Development:

This is an approach to project management of software development. While it comes from different origins, it has much in common with the design methodologies outlined above. Agile is based around short cyclical iterations, building from a minimum viable product outwards. Each development task is based on an identified user need, which are prioritised and regularly revisited. The whole team reflects on progress and communication between the developers and product owner (see below) happens regularly. This approach means that as new user needs arise or others become obsolete features can be incorporated or discarded as required. (Szalvay, n.d.).

In Agile development, the **Product Owner** is responsible for communicating the vision of the project to the team. The role also includes “working closely with key stakeholders throughout the organization and beyond, so he or she must be able to communicate different messages to different people about the project at any given time” (Mountain Goat Software, n.d.). The similarities of this role to the ‘designer as

facilitator’ role make them compatible, and I would argue that combining them gave this project additional strength.

As its mission was participation, the co-creative, collaborative aspect common to all of these approaches was critical to the project. This theme ran through the design research, the choice to develop as open source software, the marketing and communications and the public use of the platform.

Collaborations

For design to be transformational, it cannot be done alone. This was very much a team project, supported by:

Massey University: As part of the Master of Design programme, the project received guidance and support from my supervisors, Karl Kane and Claire Robinson, as well as the postgraduate co-ordinator Julieanna Preston. This context provided a studio space, shared with other Masters candidates, and allowed me to co-locate with the technical lead, as well as spaces to meet with external stakeholders. Massey University also funded the project through its strategic innovation fund, which enabled the professional web development of the platform, and marketing funds.

The New Zealand **Electoral Commission** supported this research by awarding a Suffrage Scholarship, which covered my course fees. They also provided advice about elec-

toral law and, while they could not officially endorse the project, promoted it through their social media channels.

Jonathan Lemmon, who was initially hired as the Technical Lead for the project, but shifted into a User Experience, User Interface designer's role as we worked. He has a background in civic technology, having co-founded the collaborative decision making platform Loomio. Jon contributed technical project management expertise as well as design input, and a large part of the programming itself.

Enspiral: A collection of individuals and businesses who are working in social enterprise. They use business models that prioritise environmental and social impacts alongside financial gain. The project received a lot of advice and support through the Enspiral network, including software quotes, open source legal advice, communications strategy, general idea sharing and contacts. The initial prototype of the platform, built in 2013, was developed entirely by volunteer web developers associated with Enspiral, including Jon Lemmon.

The Design & Democracy Project: a strategic research unit within Massey's School of Design which aims to "enhance conversation and participation on social issues through design (n.d.). Led by Karl Kane, it was under the umbrella of the D&D project that *Ask Away* was funded. The unit was situated within OpenLab, a design studio within Massey's College of Creative Arts. This relationship meant that the budget and contracts were professionally managed, as well as providing access to senior designers for critique.



Figure 8. Developers at a 'hack night' (coding session).

On the Fence: The other project within the D&D unit, *On the Fence* was led by Kieran Stowers. (See Appendix One). As well as support, critique and idea sharing between the projects, *On the Fence* linked to *Ask Away* as a means for further exploration of issues, which directed a significant amount of traffic to the site.

Code for New Zealand: a recently established collective of developers led by Rowan Crawford. Through sessions run on weekends and evenings CFNZ developers built features into the application, supplementing the scope of what could be built within the budget and timeframe.

Virgin Voter Collective: This was a campaign initiated by entrepreneur Derek Handley and led by Hannah Duder, who created her own youth engagement application, *CandiDate*. The VVC included other youth efforts *RockEnrol*, Generation Zero's *Stand Up* and *On the Fence*. The idea was to provide an umbrella campaign and website for cross promotion and media purposes.

Political party communications staff and

candidates: eighty political candidates and organisational staff contributed to the project by coordinating and answering questions on the site. More than just another group of users, the political parties were important stakeholders, as the project depended on their participation.

Radio New Zealand contracted the team to embed the *Ask Away* feed into their website, and into their youth focussed web platform, **The Wireless**. As well as being part of their online coverage, RNZ were able to report on the parties' answers on air, and have a source of content which was different to their competitors and which gave their users a chance to participate. They were pleased at the opportunity to connect on air with digital interactive content. *Ask Away* was covered on the Insight, Morning Report, Nine to Noon, and Mediawatch programmes. See Appendix Two for a list of the full media coverage.

My role was to fit these elements together, to define and communicate the purpose and vision for the project, and then identify who could contribute to it. With diverse groups of people involved, I needed to be aware of all of their needs and motivations, and balance and shape the project accordingly. Communication, visual or otherwise, was integral to this.

The next section describes the process I undertook to realise this project. I discuss the academic and user research, the design outputs, interface design and algorithm, the involvement of political parties, the social media campaign and the broader communications plan.

Gathering

This stage involved gathering material from many sources, focusing on three strands of inquiry: **user research**, **user experience design** and **political science**.

Sense-making

The material was made sense of through various methods which helped establish relationships, themes and gaps.

Connecting

At this point connections could be drawn between information which had come from different fields.

Synthesis

The research was synthesised into three strategic aims: **reach**, **inform** and **engage**. For example, theory about web design for ease of understanding was aligned with the goal of 'inform'.

Creating

From these goals the design outputs were created and refined. Each output aimed to fulfil some or all of the three aims.

Response

The response once the platform was public then began to feed back in information from users and commentary from media.

Reflection

The site was evaluated against the three strategic aims. Opportunities for the future have arisen.

			Page	
	Journey mapping	18		
	Card sorting	22		
	Observation			
	Use			
	Blog posts	31		
	Papers	16		
	Personas	20		
	Affinity mapping	18		
	Feature audit			
	Interface analysis	26		
	Written reflection			
	Mind-mapping	81		
	Diagrams			
	Strategy:	23		
	Reach			
	Inform			
	Engage			
	User stories	24	Communications plan	33
	Wireframes	25	Social media	35
	Code	29	campaign	
Platform	26			
		User questions	37	
		User comments		
		User photographs	82	
		User Likes, comments and shares	38	
		User feedback	39	
		Site analytics	37	
		Media coverage	44	
		Politcal commentary		

Practice: Understanding the problem

The first stage of the design thinking process as defined by IDEO, a consultancy that specialises in human-centred design, is 'hear'. It involves understanding the problem from different angles and gaining empathy for those involved before thinking about solutions (IDEO, 2009). When the Masters programme began in February, I felt some tension entering the first stage of the design process with some existing parameters around what would be produced. The two main differences to the existing platform were that this iteration was specifically to encourage turnout, and that it was to be aimed at 18-24 year olds. I deliberately ignored my intended 'solution' in my early research to gain understanding for my target audience, in line with HCD process.

Voter Motivation Theories

Expert opinions and prior research form one aspect of understanding the situation, and complement direct user research (IDEO & Acumen, 2013). I began my research by looking at what was already known about the problem.

In 2008, qualitative research conducted by the Electoral Commission found that for many young non-voters the elections "were not on my wavelength" (Dinsdale, n.d., para. 10). This suggests that what information was around was failing to engage, in both perceived relevance and in where it was appearing. In the subsequent Electoral Commission survey of the 2011 election, the most common reason given by youth for non voting was 'couldn't work out who to vote for'. When combined with 'did not know the candidates' and 'did not know

enough about the policies', this lack of information makes up 24% of non-voters (Colmar Brunton, 2012). The 2012 *General Social Survey* paints a slightly different picture: "21 percent of non-voters said they did not vote in the 2011 General Election because they 'didn't get round to it, forgot or were not interested' to vote" (Statistics NZ, para. 8). This suggests that while supplying information is important, any interventions need to go further to create interest and engagement in youth.

Theories from the field of political science offer multiple explanations for non-voting. "One strong predictor of levels of participation is **efficacy**, which refers to an individual's perception of their ability to know what is going on, be heard and make a difference politically" (Catt, 2005, p. 1). Catt, a former New Zealand Chief Executive of the Electoral Commission, distinguishes between internal and external efficacy. Internal efficacy is connected to how interesting and relevant people find politics, and external efficacy relates to trust in government and the responsiveness of politicians and political systems (Catt, 2005).

The concept of efficacy reveals several points at which interventions could be aimed to increase participation, and it underpinned the strategies which framed the design output. Facilitating dialogue between people and politicians creates opportunities for people to experience political participation on their own terms; which could increase relevance and build confidence in their ability to be heard. In addition, it reinforces a sense of external efficacy by demonstrating the responsiveness of the candidates through their answers.

An associated concept is **political engagement**, which includes the three facets of political trust, political knowledge and political participation (Vaishnav and Ferreira, 2011). Another is **mobilisation** theory. The key proponents of this theory, Rosenstone and Hansen, argue that “people participate in electoral politics because someone encourages them to take part” (1993, p. 161). This theory draws the connection between falling party memberships and turnout decline (Sheerin, 2007, p. 19). Without grassroots mobilisation of members, people are not invited to join in. While this mobilisation role was previously played by political parties, there is an argument that this would be an appropriate role for non-partisan third parties to play, whether that be electoral authorities, non-government-organisations or academic institutions.

Social norms are a related concept, where pressure is created by society to vote. Swedish research showed that “people are strongly influenced by a social norm saying that it is an obligation to vote”, and are more likely to vote when messages suggest turnout will be high — ‘everyone else is doing it so you should too’ (Carlsson and Johansson-Stenman, 2009, p.1). It follows that prior to Election Day, making political engagement by youth more visible to their peers would reinforce this social norm.

Most systems of government were developed in the 19th Century. Since then there have been radical improvements in information and communication technologies and uses that may have rendered the traditional Westminster system out of date. A post-materialist critique of traditional political institutions suggests that citizens

have found alternative ways to participate that better reflect their values and concerns, reflected in rising levels of people engaging in activities such as product boycotts or demonstrations (Sheerin, 2007). The rise in online activism, or ‘clicktivism’, as part of these alternative forms of participation demonstrates there is an opportunity for digital interventions in the democratic realm.

User research

Alongside academic research, primary research was conducted with target users to uncover insights and gain empathy. Eleven workshop style interviews were conducted which included one or all of the following three exercises. Peers in Wellington were asked to take part since they were within the target age group, and three more interviews were conducted in Lower Hutt to widen the diversity of the sample. For a table of participant demographics, see Appendix Five.

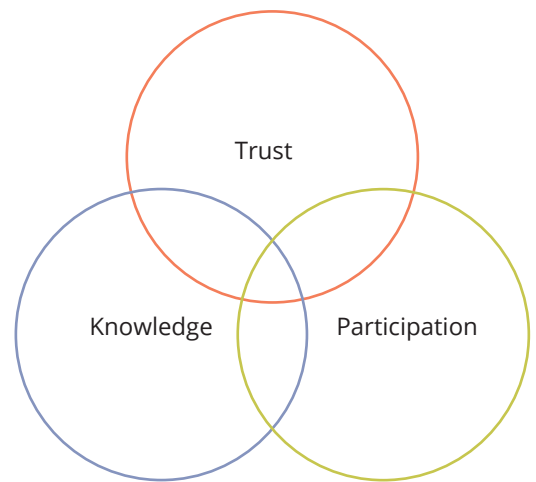


Figure 9. Vaishnav and Ferreira's facet's of Political Engagement. 2011.

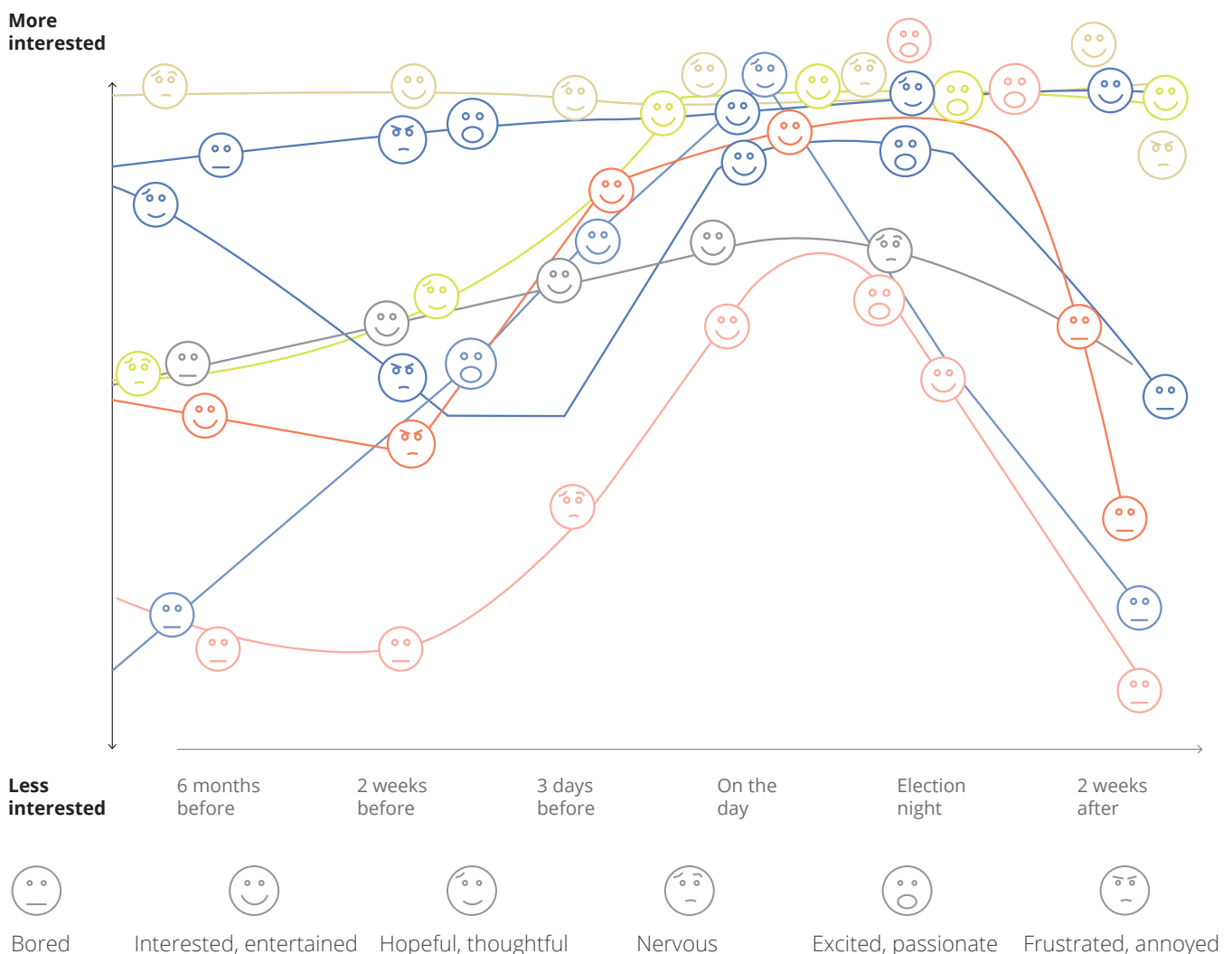
Timelines

The main part of the user research comprised of a set of timelines created by participants during individual or pair workshops (Appendix Three). These mapped their thoughts, feelings and actions leading up to an election. In their work on generative design, Stappers and Saunders propose that research activities where participants create artefacts can help uncover tacit and latent knowledge (2013). This exercise also provided insight into the language used, the attitudes and behaviours of youth around elections.

Figure 10. Summary of user timelines approaching the election. Each colour represents a individual, each emoticon shows how they were feeling at that point in time.

From these eight timelines, four themes emerged. These were uncovered by reviewing notes and recordings of the workshops, and clumping comments into similar groups, a process known as affinity mapping (Usability Net, 2006).

The first and strongest negative reaction from participants was concerned with the media. There was a feeling that the **media changes its focus**; “the news changes... suddenly a story about a corrupt politician becomes a whole lot bigger because it’s election year”. There was a feeling that personal elements become over inflated, “I



think some of the human drama is part of what puts me off about politics. You know, who said that and who said this, meanwhile, who's actually running the country?". On top of this, the sheer volume of coverage meant:

"I will get confused and over it... it's overwhelming".

The second theme was **a feeling of guilt about the prospect of not taking part**. While I found some participants who self-identified as uninterested in politics, they were still definitely intending on voting. This 'civic guilt' seemed to be a part of their motivation to vote — when they admitted a lack of interest it was apologetically. 'Should' came up often — "you should vote, it's your civic responsibility", "your one inroads to democratic process". The surveys I conducted when evaluating the project (Appendix Nine) also confirmed that an individual can have low levels of interest and perceived relevance but high likeliness to vote, which I suspect comes from this sense of duty. This finding is backed up in Sheerin's work which found that low levels of internal efficacy do not translate directly into non-voting (2007).

According to Carlsson and Johansson-Stenman, this sense of civic responsibility is closely connected with social pressure from friends and family, which emphasises the importance of spreading the social norm of voting (2009, p.1).

The third negative theme was that we have an **unattractive political scene** in New Zealand.

This related to both individual politicians — "this guy would be scary if he gets in"; to parties — "I'm unenthused about the options"; to the system — "it's a pretty ugly industry". One participant summed it up succinctly: "Oh yeah, the election's shit".

The final point I gathered from these workshops was **a feeling that nothing would change in this election**.

"The way it's sitting at the moment, or the way they've [the media] painted it — what's the point?"

"Either they'll change the government or they won't and it'll go on pretty much as usual".

One participant who was helping with a campaign asked herself "Should I be putting my energy somewhere else?". This supports the theory of post material political participation, where youth view traditional political engagement as ineffective and often practise alternative forms of civic engagement outside of voting (Donald, 2010).

As well as attitudes, this process helped me gain some insight into the social behaviours around the election, and also into what media platforms they would use to access information. For example, one participant said "Facebook was really good, I knew that if I wanted to find out what was going on [with the election] I wouldn't go to a news site, I'd go straight to Facebook".

Personas

A persona is “a fictional individual representing characteristics of the target group” (Stappers and Saunders, 2013, p. 302). They can be used as tools to help think about segments of a target audience. For this part of the project I created a number of personas based on cats (see Figures 11-14). The cat personas were informed by both the early timeline activity and previous research commissioned by the Electoral Commission in 2007 that identified five segments of non-voters, ‘Politically Absent’, ‘Living for the Weekend’, ‘Distrustful and Disillusioned’, ‘Tentative Triers’ and ‘Confident and Convinced’ (Dinsdale, n.d., para. 5). Photos were chosen of cats which displayed body language associated with the different personas – for example, the image of “Upstanding Cat” is a cat sitting upright, whereas “Uninterested cat” is slumped backwards, reminiscent of a passive television watcher.

Using cats as a discussion point with research participants was a good way of checking my assumptions about the target audience. The use of animals meant that demographics like age, gender and race were left out of the mix and discussion could focus on attitudes and behaviours. Participants identified with the personas, and could fit themselves and their peers into one or several of the categories; “Oh yeah, I’m a bit of a mix between Upstanding and Uncertain Cats”.

The personas were especially effective in prompting discussion about what motivations different people would have for using the site.

For example, a particularly useful insight was that Upstanding and Uncertain Cats would be looking for different information on the site.

Upstanding Cats would be quite clear about the issues they cared about, and would look for questions about those. Uncertain would want to know what the issues were that they ‘should’ know about — the things that everyone else considered important. Participants thought for this reason that the Uncertain Cat would want an overview of “what’s trending right now” so that they would not look uninformed — “it’s a Top 40, if politics was a Top 40”.

There was also recognition that Uncertain Cats are often wary of people trying to convince them. One participant talked about being influenced by a passionate flatmate in the previous election and then realising he did not agree personally. For this reason, strongly worded or heavily partisan questions might be off putting to this group.

These four personas are not a complete set; I asked participants “Who is missing?” and each group had a different response, or recognised segments within one persona. The Cynical Cat (or “apathetic evangelist” according to one participant) is an active non-voter who does not buy into the system, and the Evangelist Cat can be divided into “political hacks” and “issues based activists”. Deliberately not being exhaustive in my options left room for participants to ‘fill in the blanks’ and contribute their insights.



1. Evangelist Cat

- Engaged in issues outside of election time
- Probably has a specific cause or issue they're passionate about
- Might be encouraging everyone to get involved
- Is looking for tools to further their agenda

3. Uncertain Cat

- Could be a first time voter — unfamiliar with the process
- They might not decide whether or not to vote until late in the game
- Will take opportunities not to vote (like other commitments)
- Finds politics confusing and doesn't want to look dumb
- Might have a vague feeling that they 'should' vote
- Will vote if someone asks them to or makes it easy

2. Upstanding Cat

- Will vote unless something gets in the way
- Probably votes with family and friends
- Might be aligned to a particular party based on family or peer's values
- Feels comfortable with the process of voting
- Doesn't usually follow politics but will read up around election time
- Might not want to get into a very heated discussion around politics

4. Uninterested Cat

- Thinks politics are irrelevant
- Doesn't notice election or political news or advertising
- Doesn't think they have a role to play
- Doesn't relate to politicians or the issues they talk about
- Thinks politics is a boring topic

Clockwise from top: Figure 11. *Grey kitten excited*. (n.d.). Figure 12. Alvesgaspar. (2010) *Brown tabby cat*. Figure 13. *Lazy cat bored*. (n.d.). Figure 14. *Timid cat*. (n.d.).

Card sort

This was an exercise to inform the categories the questions would be sorted into on the site. Participants were asked to sort fifty cards with names of policy areas or ministries into about twelve groups (Figure 5). Although categories never ended up being implemented on the site, this gave me a valuable empathy for my audience. I knew in theory that it was important to use language the target audience would relate to (IDEO & Acumen, 2013), but this experience took me from just knowing about to committing to the idea.

Finding people to interview who were not likely to vote to interview was a challenge for me. After conducting the first three workshops, I had been gaining useful information, but so far it was similar to what I would have assumed myself. So, I asked *Secret Level*, a youth space in Lower Hutt, whether I could come out and interview some young people visiting their space.

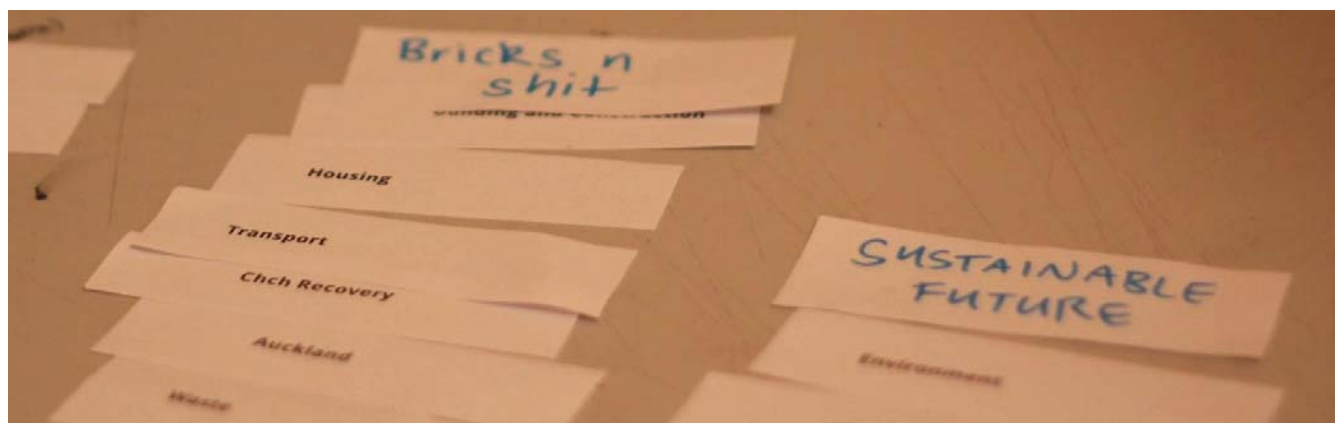
I took the sorting cards to create some categories for the subject areas, and sat down with a couple of girls. I told them what I was working on, and spread the cards out on the table. As soon as they saw the cards,

their body language changed. They leant back in their chairs and started looking away.

Seeing the words “State Owned Enterprises” triggers a strong “not for me” message in some people’s minds.

I changed tack, and asked the hip-hop group who had come in to practise what their top three most important topics would be. One said youth would only be interested in Food and Sports and Recreation. I asked whether Arts, Culture and Heritage might be similar to Sports and Recreation (since he was in a dance group). He replied “Most of the arts wouldn’t be what’s under that, they’d be talking about art galleries... youth would be more into graffiti and tagging”. So, to state the obvious, if there was an “Arts, Culture and Heritage” category on *Ask Away* (the name of the ministry), it would clearly tell these young people that it did not include them, or the things they are interested in.

Figure 15. Categories grouped by participants.



Practice: Developing a solution

Strategy

Once a good level of insight into the attitudes and behaviour of this audience had been gained, a project strategy was structured around three persuasive strategies: to **reach, inform and engage**.

Aim One: Reach

Qualitative research conducted by the Electoral Commission found that for many young non-voters the elections “were not on my wavelength”, (Dinsdale, 2007, para. 10) so the project should bring political discussion into the spaces young people already inhabit online.

Goal: Content will be delivered to the target audience via the channels of information they are already using, be those real life social networks, social media, or traditional media (e.g. it will show up on their Facebook feed, or in discussion with friends).

Outcome: People who would not otherwise seek out this material will be exposed to it, which will raise their awareness about the election and the candidates. The use of social channels will also help to create social pressure to get involved (Kiderra, 2012).

Aim Two: Inform

If political efficacy is in part defined by an individual’s ability to understand politics, then making it as easy as possible to acquire that understanding is crucial. Lack of information about the candidates and the policies put together formed the largest factor (34%) of the reasons given by youth for why they did not vote in the 2011 general election (Colmar Brunton, 2012).

However, best practice information and UX design can go a long way towards making information digestible and engaging, and to making sure that the users can easily find (or are delivered) the content that is relevant to them (Nielson, 1995).

Goal: The site’s users will be able to easily understand and digest the information presented on the site.

Outcome: Ease of understanding should increase both the user’s political knowledge and their confidence in that knowledge, which will directly contribute to their sense of political efficacy (Catt, 2005).

Aim Three: Engage

At this point, user experience design offers tools for the creation of political efficacy. To develop a meaningful relationship with the idea of elections, the experience of using the application must be personalised. This includes tactics to make sure users are served information that is highly relevant to their own concerns or those of others in their social groups. It also means they are given a role to play in the functioning of the site. The more valued they feel their role is, the more likely they are to continue to contribute to the online community (Masli and Terveen, 2012).

Goals:

- Information will be relevant to users and their communities
- Users will feel that they are able to help decide what is important
- Users will feel that their voice matters and is being counted
- Users will feel like part of a community of interested people

Outcome: These combined elements of engagement will reinforce users' perceptions of their ability to participate in political discourse and process. The responses from candidates or party representatives should also make a valuable contribution to users' perceptions of external efficacy in relation to the responsiveness of politicians and candidates (Catt, 2005).

User stories

In Agile development, user stories are “a reminder to have a conversation with your customer” — high level tasks written from a users point of view (Agile Modelling, n.d., para 2). The process of writing these stories is where the insights from users are translated into the features of the site, and the development pipeline is built from these blocks. These stories were written collaboratively with Jon Lemmon, using the template “As a <type of user>, I want <some goal> so that <some reason>”. This meant every feature built on the site mapped directly to specific user need.

The three strategic aims were reframed into a user perspective, and potential features ideas were generated based on these.

Aim One: Reach

I need content to come to me.

Aim Two: Inform

I need information that is easy to understand.

Aim Three: Engage

I need it to be relevant to me, I need to know my voice matters and that everyone is doing this.

Each of these aims produced user stories, which were then grouped, prioritised and shared with the development team (Figures 16 and 17). A lot of work was put into developing and maintaining this project plan by Jon, and it was what enabled other developers to easily pick up tasks and make meaningful contributions.

For example:

Sorting algorithm — top content

As a new visitor, I want to see the most voted for content first so that I don't have to spend a long time looking for interesting and relevant content

Sorting algorithm — new content

As a returning visitor, I want to see new content on a daily basis so that I can see more stuff that people care about.

Not all of the stories ended up in the platform, because it was developed incrementally. This meant making one minimum viable product (the smallest set of features it needed to function) and then adding to it rather than doing it all in one go. This style of development meant that we remained flexible about what could be built and new features could be added as new needs arose. For example, after launch, user feedback was that a ‘recently answered’ view would be useful, so it was added.

Because some of the developers were working remotely, it was important that everyone had online access to the planning board (Figure 17). Design mock-ups were added to the stories as they were built, meaning the design didn’t need to be finalised before starting development.

Wireframes

Wireframes are basic representations of the user interface of a website. They are often deliberately low fidelity, and use limited colours, fonts and images (Usability.gov, n.d.). This allows designers to explore multiple possible layouts, without spending time on visual refinement.

The user stories informed rough wireframes (Figure 18), which were developed into higher fidelity mock-ups that guided the developers.



Figure 16. Generating user stories from the three strategic aims.

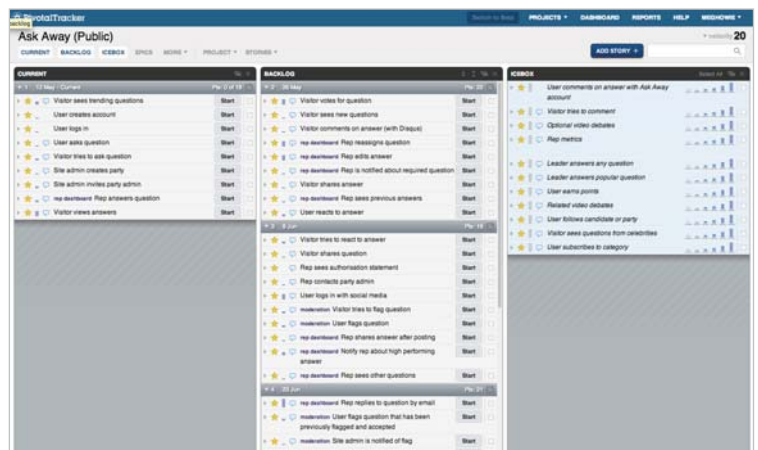


Figure 17. The development task list. Screen capture from Pivotal Tracker.

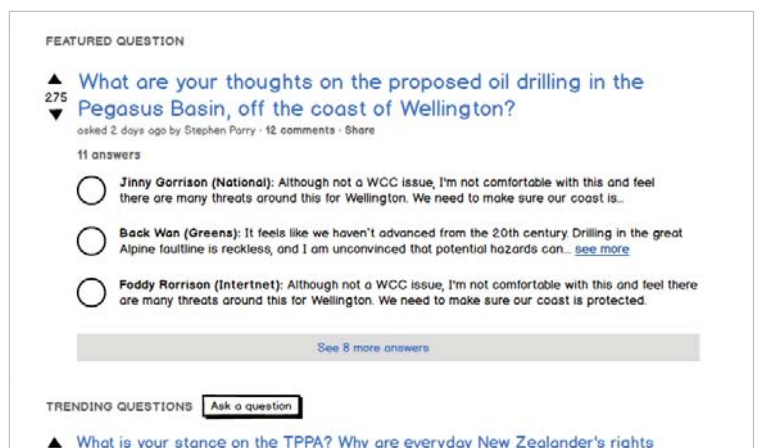


Figure 18. An early wireframe of the home page. Screen capture from Balsamiq (wireframing software).

The Platform

User Experience Precedents

At this time, analysis of precedents in online engagement guided the development of the interface. Figure 19 is a 'devil's advocate' exercise – an exploration of what the site might look like if it referenced the design of BuzzFeed, a pop culture site which is the epitome of attention grabbing – arguably at the cost of credibility and comprehension (Appendix One). Exploring an extreme design meant I was not censoring what felt right for the project. Afterwards, I saw that reaction buttons (shown in yellow) might be a valuable feature if toned down. Though they did not make it through development, they are still in the future pipeline for the site.

The design of Reddit, a content sharing site where users curate content by up or down-voting it, was also a key design reference (see Appendix One).

Ask Away is a question and answer platform, the primary feature of which is a essentially a long list of the public's questions. Visitors to the site can endorse questions by up-voting them, making them more likely to be answered. They also had the option of sharing questions via Facebook or Twitter.

The page which visitors to the site land on shows a list of 'trending' questions, sorted by an algorithm. This pushes questions up the list as they gain votes, and drops them down over time, presenting a dynamic feed of recent popular questions. As well as searching by keyword, visitors can sort the list of questions by 'newest', 'recently answered' and 'most popular' (questions with the most votes). Clicking on a question reveals any answers to that question from candidates inline (Figure 20), and users can click through to another page to comment on a question and its answers.

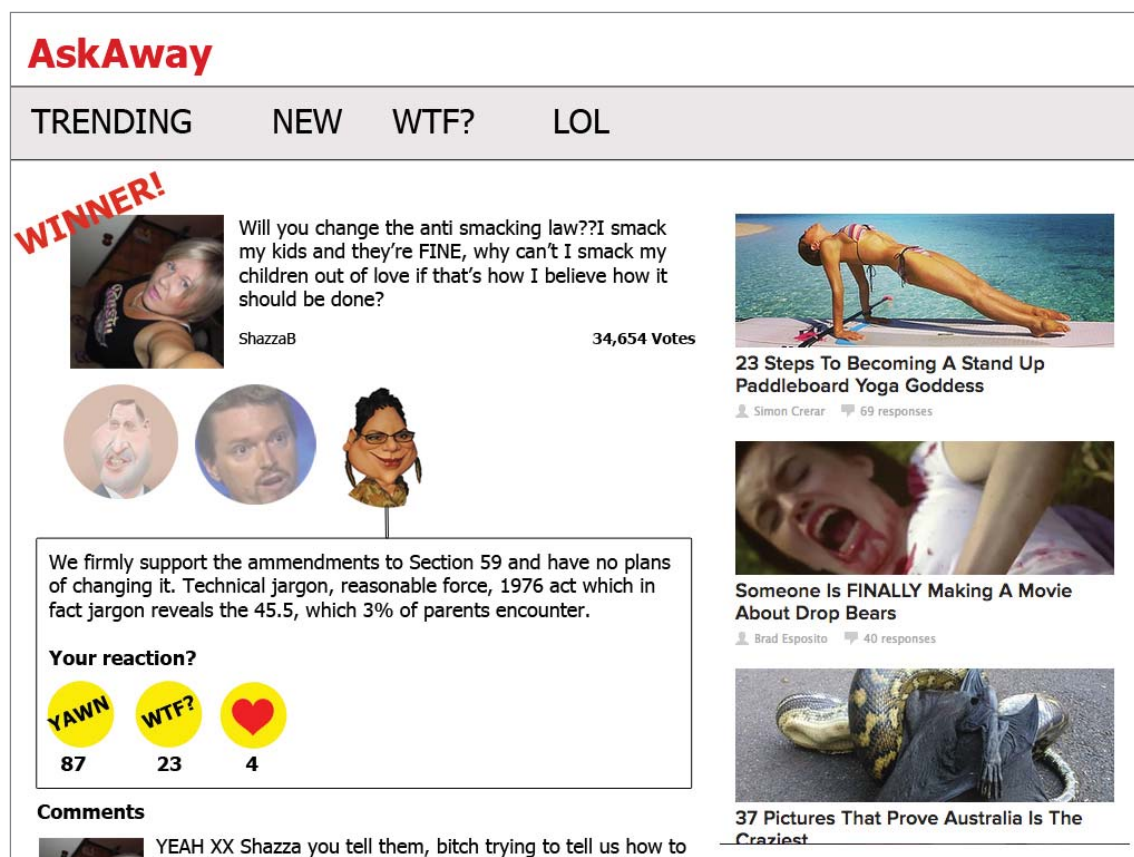


Figure 19.
*Buzzfeed Inspired
Exploratory Design.*

Figure 20. *The Ask Away platform homepage.* Screen capture from Askaway.org.nz

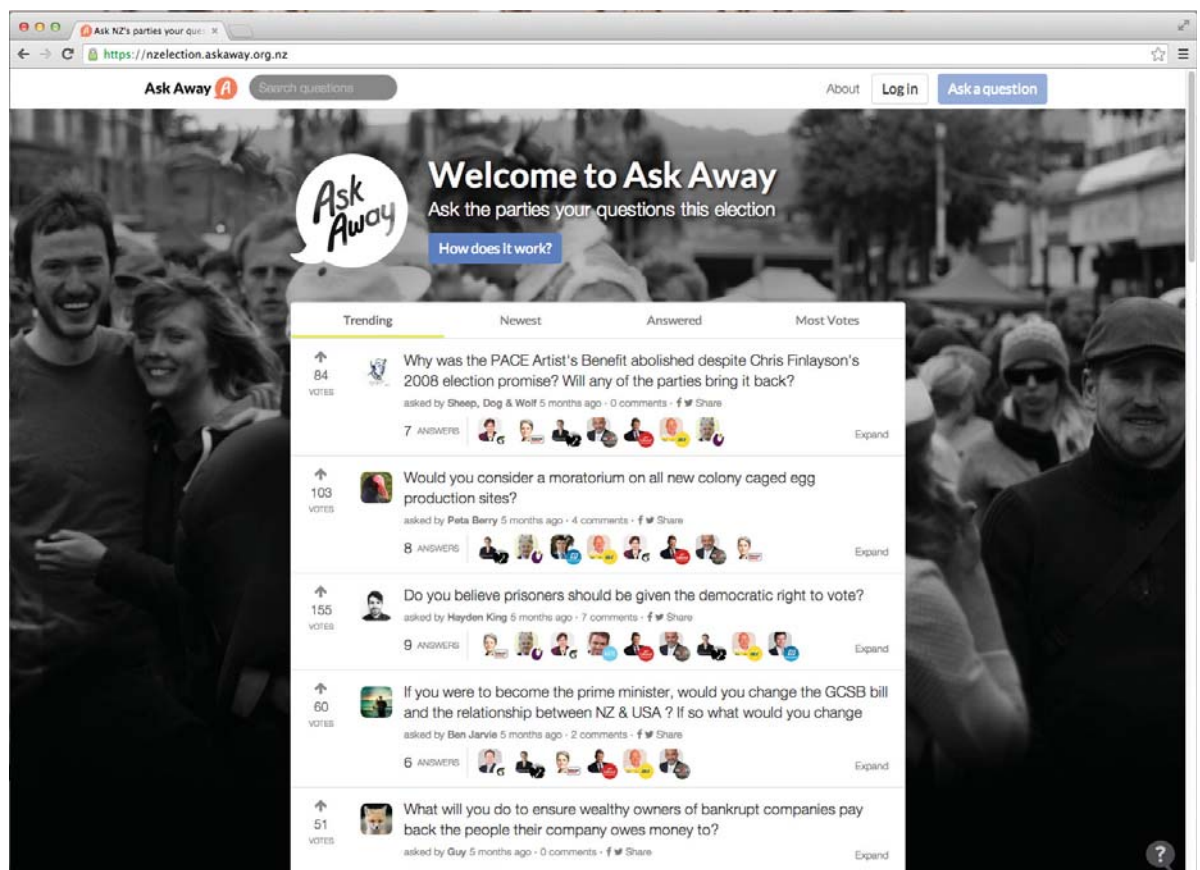
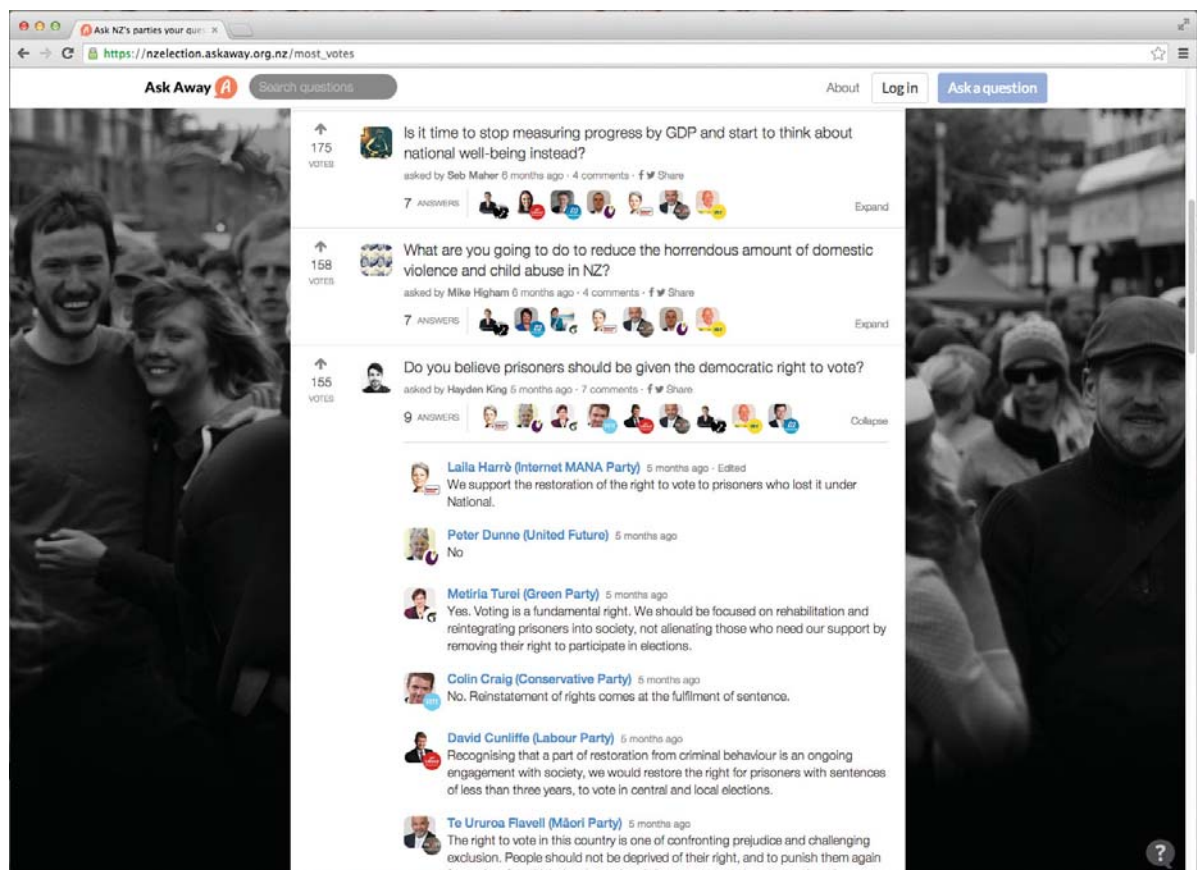


Figure 21. *A question expanded to reveal answers.* Screen capture from Askaway.org.nz.



Candidates from the parties were provided with links to create special accounts that allowed them to answer questions on the site. Each party has a page showing who its representatives are, and each representative has a page showing their picture and all of the questions they have answered (Figure 22). Each member of the public who created an account and asked a question also has a page showing all the questions they have asked.

Interface design

The interface or user experience design of the platform was a collaboration that began with my user research and ended with Jon's detailed refinement. The design prioritises content; users are greeted when they arrive at the site, then are shown the 'trending' questions and answers.

As one of the core missions of the site was to make it easier for young people to be engaged, the site itself needed to be easy to use.

"The total cognitive load, or amount of mental processing power needed to use your site, affects how easily users find content and complete tasks" (Whitenton 2013, para. 1). The Nielsen Norman Group's usability guidelines suggest building on existing mental models so that users do not have to learn their way around a new interface (Whitenton 2013). Given our

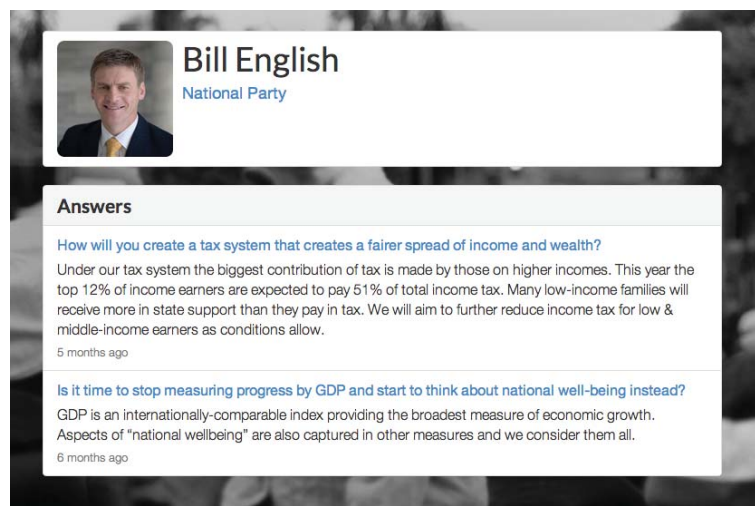


Figure 22. Bill English's page (Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Finance and Minister of Infrastructure) on Askaway.org.nz. Screen capture.

youthful target audience, we used social media sites Twitter and Facebook as reference points for the interface design, right down to the use of Helvetica font family. Not only did this provide them with a sense of familiarity, it also provided cues about the types of interactions hosted on the site. In particular, many people commented on the format's similarity to Twitter, meaning the behaviour expected was familiar to many users. The up voting arrow was also inspired by Facebook's Like button. In the previous iteration the site directly embedded Like buttons and used them as proxy vote counters, though these were removed in place of up arrows. The concept of adding personal approval to something in this way is akin to signing a petition, and although some are derisive of the low commitment required of this kind of activity (Rotman et. al, 2011), I argue that one click participation is a valuable stepping stone to further engagement.

Other steps to reduce cognitive load included a typographic hierarchy that prioritised user content over background information

such as dates and share buttons, and use of conventions like hover states to indicate clickable content, and placement of the login button and search bar in the top navigation bar.

The interaction was also designed to be as intuitive as possible, so that users could have an uninterrupted journey through the content. Infinite scrolling means users can read large number of questions quickly, and the answers are visible when clicked, balancing ease of access with limiting the content to that which the user is interested in. Although it was tempting to create a large landing page with a description of how the site worked, we aimed instead for it to be self-explanatory, with a 'How does it work' button available if needed.

Both profile pictures and party logos are used to identify the candidates answering the questions, in order to convey at a glance who is participating, while also putting a face on the direct, personal nature of the interaction (Figure 24).

Responsive and cross browser design

To make politics more accessible, the site needed to be available on any platform, so it was fully responsive, meaning it could be viewed on phones and tablets, and across a range of browsers (Figure 23).

Technical Frameworks

Open source web development frameworks were used to cut down on development time. Rather than building every element

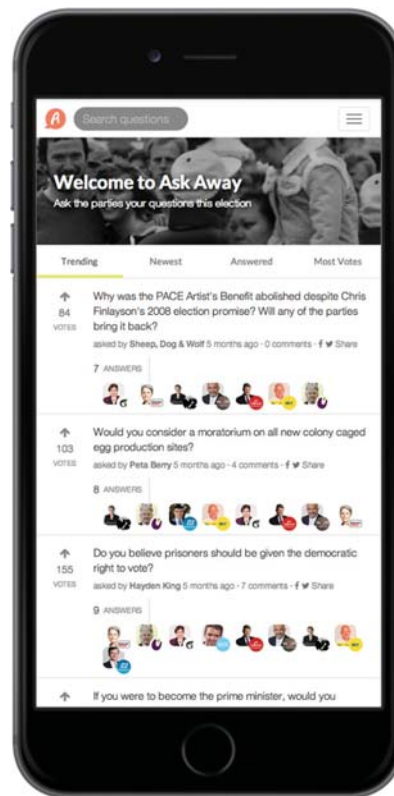


Figure 23. Ask Away on mobile. Screen capture from Askaway.org.nz.

from scratch, these frameworks provided many of the pieces needed to put the application together. Ruby on Rails is a web application (or back-end) framework written in the programming language Ruby. Its components involve infrastructure like databases, mailers for automating emails, user accounts and logins. AngularJS is another 'back-end' framework which uses Javascript and handles the in page interaction – for example, expanding and collapsing the answers within the list of questions. Bootstrap is a 'front-end' framework built by Twitter, it supplies elements for the presentation of the website such as grids, typography settings and a default navigation bar.

Figure 24. Detail view of the answers preview on a question. Screen capture from Askaway.org.nz



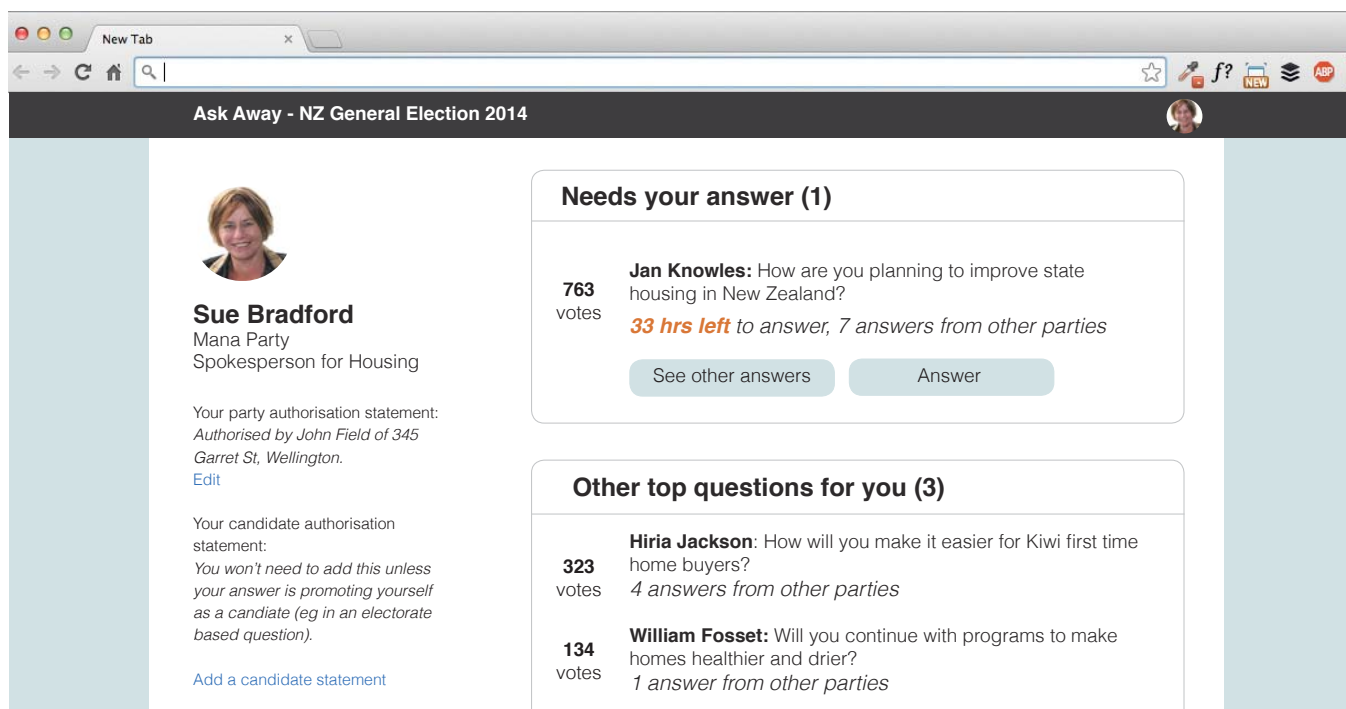


Figure 25. Original design of the Candidate's dashboard

Using these frameworks meant a working prototype of the site could be built quickly and then adapted. An additional advantage of Bootstrap is that because it is widely used in contemporary web design, its user interface patterns (for example the top navigation bar) would be familiar to many users.

Signing up candidates

One of the biggest challenges for the site was making sure that there was enough contribution from the candidates, and it turned out to be one of its biggest successes, with over a thousand answers from sixty different candidates. Several strategies were used to make this happen.

The site aimed to be user centred, and while we tested on our primary audience of 18-24 year olds throughout (Appendix Four), it was much harder to test it on party representatives. To overcome this,

we thought carefully about the experience from the point of view of someone answering on behalf of a party and modelled their user journeys. I also met with communications staff from two parties and ran through the workflow with them to check for issues.

Initial designs had a separate dashboard for representatives, with a list of questions to be answered, which used the mental model of an email inbox to be cleared (Figure 25). We changed this design to use a model more like Twitter, where, once logged in, the candidate could interact on the same interface as any other user. This changed the dynamic, from 'chores to be done' to 'conversations to join in'. We wanted to reward the reps for answering, and decided that seeing their answer appear on the page immediately was the positive feedback they needed. We also added in a "Great answer, why not share it?" flash alert that appeared after they had posted their reply. Feedback is an important principle of user experience

design, the Hook model developed by Nir Eyal outlines how positive feedback received immediately after an action releases dopamine in the brain, and can form strong user habits through repetition (Eyal, 2014).

The Hook model in practice:

Trigger: Email reminder. Some candidates also set the page as the landing page on their campaign computer to remind themselves (Adern, personal communication, February 14th 2015).

Action: Follow the link in email and answer question on site.

Variable reward: Flash message saying thank you, answer appearing on the page alongside others, possible Tweet acknowledging answers, possible media coverage.

Investment: The building of a profile page and reputation for engaging.

There was an assumption it would be necessary to get the parties to commit to conditions of participation, initially answering one question a day per party, and that there would need to be a complicated automated system for assigning the questions to their correct spokespeople. However, the rules were kept flexible by not being written into the code, and were enforced by social pressure instead. The 'low ball' technique from behavioural psychology also informed the thinking here — people are more likely to agree to a larger request later if they have already agreed to a smaller request beforehand (Heath, 2010). So it was better to invite candidates to take part without a minimum contribution, then follow up later if more regular answers were needed.

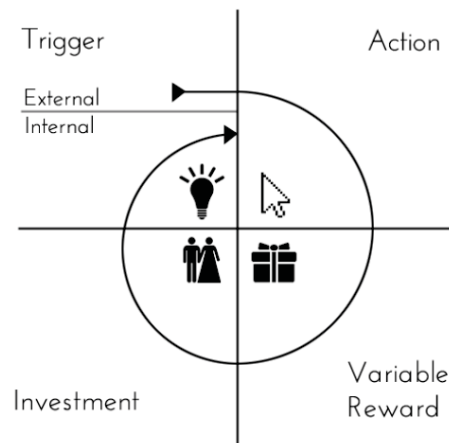


Figure 26. Eyal. 2014. *The Hook Model*. Diagram.

We also realised that most representatives would know which topics were under their domain, so put aside categories and simply instructed them to answer the questions about their policy areas. The timing of the request was also important, members of online communities are more likely to participate when their contributions are unique and valued (Masli & Terveen, 2012), so I sent emails to specific party members letting them know when there was a popular question in their area that they could answer (Appendix Seven). This flexible structure meant there was room for enthusiastic contributors to give a lot of answers (sometimes up to twenty a day), and that those who were unresponsive were replaced.

Following the marketing heuristic that a target audience needs to be exposed to a brand three times before they'll notice it (Nelson Media, n.d.), I used multiple channels to raise awareness, including getting party staff to send out a heads up, directly emailing and tweeting to candidates, asking youth party wings to encourage their candidates to take part and introducing myself at debates and events. Persistence was an extremely important part of the strategy.

Finally, we made it very obvious to a user scrolling through the questions who had answered, and in what order. This created political FOMO (fear of missing out) and was commented on regularly by users (C Robinson, personal communication, May 13, 2014).

Algorithm

The algorithm controlled the order of the ‘Trending’ questions on the homepage of the site. This was a balancing act between two user needs — ‘as a first time user, I want to see the best content first’ (best, democratically, was defined as the content with the most votes). The other need was ‘as a returning user, I want to be able to see new content quickly’. ‘Trending’ combines the two, as questions are up voted they rise up the list, and they ‘decay’ and sink down the list as time passes, making room for fresh questions.

The other consideration was the users’ sense of agency. The goal here was to make sure users felt like they had a chance to be heard — that a question had a reasonable chance of being answered, and that a single vote had an impact on those chances. This was a balance that could not be found by guessing, so the algorithm was built so that it could be easily adjusted. We found that the spike in visitors around launch created a shelf — the questions above the fold (visible without scrolling down the page) amassed about a hundred votes each, but these numbers dropped off steeply in the questions below. We adjusted for this by accelerating the rate of decay, which we adjusted several more times throughout the campaign to keep things flowing.

The control of this algorithm raised some

ethical questions, because it essentially gave us an element of control over which questions were going to get answered. There was a tension between creating an unmediated forum between people and politicians and making something engaging. One party even suggested to us that we might want to adjust the algorithm because too many questions from one user were being up voted. Ideally, the system would have kept us from having that influence, but it made the user experience much better that we did.

Visual design and typography

To combat the perception by youth that politics is irrelevant and uninteresting (Shea & Green, 2007), the visuals of the site needed to make youth feel welcome and as though this site was ‘for me’, without being patronising. The logo uses hand-drawn letters inspired by an album cover from alternative hip hop artists Jneiro Jarel and MF Doom.

This friendliness is balanced by a clean, minimal design that allowed the content to come to the fore. The headings use Lato, an open source humanist sans serif, and the body copy is Helvetica Neue, partly to replicate Twitter. The colours needed to be politically neutral, as well as functional accents within the site. An orangey peach and yellow green were chosen as youthful and dynamic. A black and white photograph in the background shows a crowd scene from the Newtown festival, which to me represents a highlight in community and civic participation in Wellington, adding interest while keeping the colour palette restricted to functional use. The photograph, which features young people, is another way of signalling to youth that this site is intended for them.



Figure 27. JJ Doom. 2012. Album cover.



Figure 28. Ask Away logo.

Tone

Getting the tone of the messaging right was important to encourage youth to engage with the site. New Zealand's official electoral mascot, the Orange Guy, adopts an extremely approachable tone, but was viewed as unsophisticated by my research participants. Youth voter campaigns overseas and in New Zealand took a more passionate tone, with campaign names like *Bite the Ballot* in the United Kingdom, *Rock the Vote* in the United States and *RockEnrol* in New Zealand. Because the user research suggested that passionate language put people on guard, *Ask Away* is positioned not as a campaign, but a platform, gently encouraging people to 'ask away'.

Communications plan

A communications plan was developed to clarify the value propositions the site had for its different audiences and stakeholders. Recognising that not all stakeholders and audiences wanted the same thing from the site was important, and defining and communicating the value these diverse groups would get from the site was central to getting them on board with it. With the

Figure 29. Facebook cover photo for Ask Away page.



overarching goal of increasing youth political engagement, it would be easy to come up with a central proposition such as “get involved!” — but this would not have communicated any value to that young audience. The persona work early on was especially helpful in defining what segments within this group would actually want.

Disengaged and uncertain youth

The social media campaign was the core of the outreach to youth, and the key objective was that young people could see themselves within *Ask Away*, and feel that the content was relevant to them. The value proposition for this audience was “an easy way to find out what the parties think about the things you care about”. This was condensed to “Not sure who to vote for? Ask Away”, which was the message on the Facebook website advert, which ran throughout the campaign.

Youth media were also targeted with this angle.

Politicians, candidates and parties

The objective here was maximum contributions of answers, and the value proposition was “an easy way of engaging with youth”. ‘Easy’ was stressed because it was recognised how busy candidates are during campaigns, so initial invitations were friendly but to the point. They referenced Massey’s Design & Democracy Project and the party secretary’s authorisation, so that it was obvious the invitation was legitimate and they did not need to seek approval to take part (Appendix Six and Seven).

Political commentators

The objective here was to make sure that content and issues raised on *Ask Away* were

considered part of the political conversation around the election, in the same way as content from Twitter became reported on (Edwards, 2014). The message was that this was an innovative new form of political engagement, and a chance for an agenda alternative to the mainstream media coverage to have some oxygen.

Mainstream media

Messages targeted at mainstream media were focussed around a platform ‘for youth by youth’ and the issue of youth voter turnout. These had the objective of spreading awareness and credibility of the project.

Community and civil society organisations and networks

The objective for these groups was to drive the first wave of engaged users to the site. These users were the ‘Evangelist Cats’, people who would use the site as a tool for raising awareness of their cause. There was a tension here, as they were not the primary target audience, but would be able to role model participation to kick things off. The message for these groups was:

‘*Ask Away* is an easy way to get people engaged and taking part. It is a way to make sure the parties are talking directly to New Zealanders about the things they care about’.

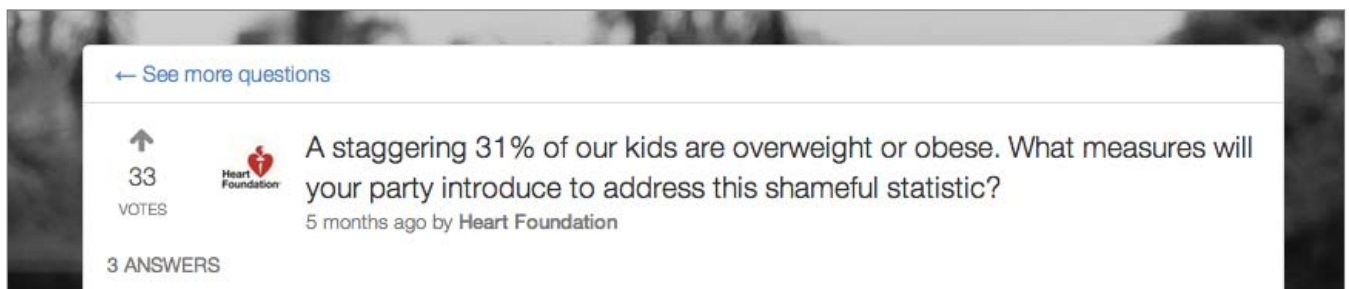


Figure 30. A question from the Heart Foundation on Ask Away. Screen capture.

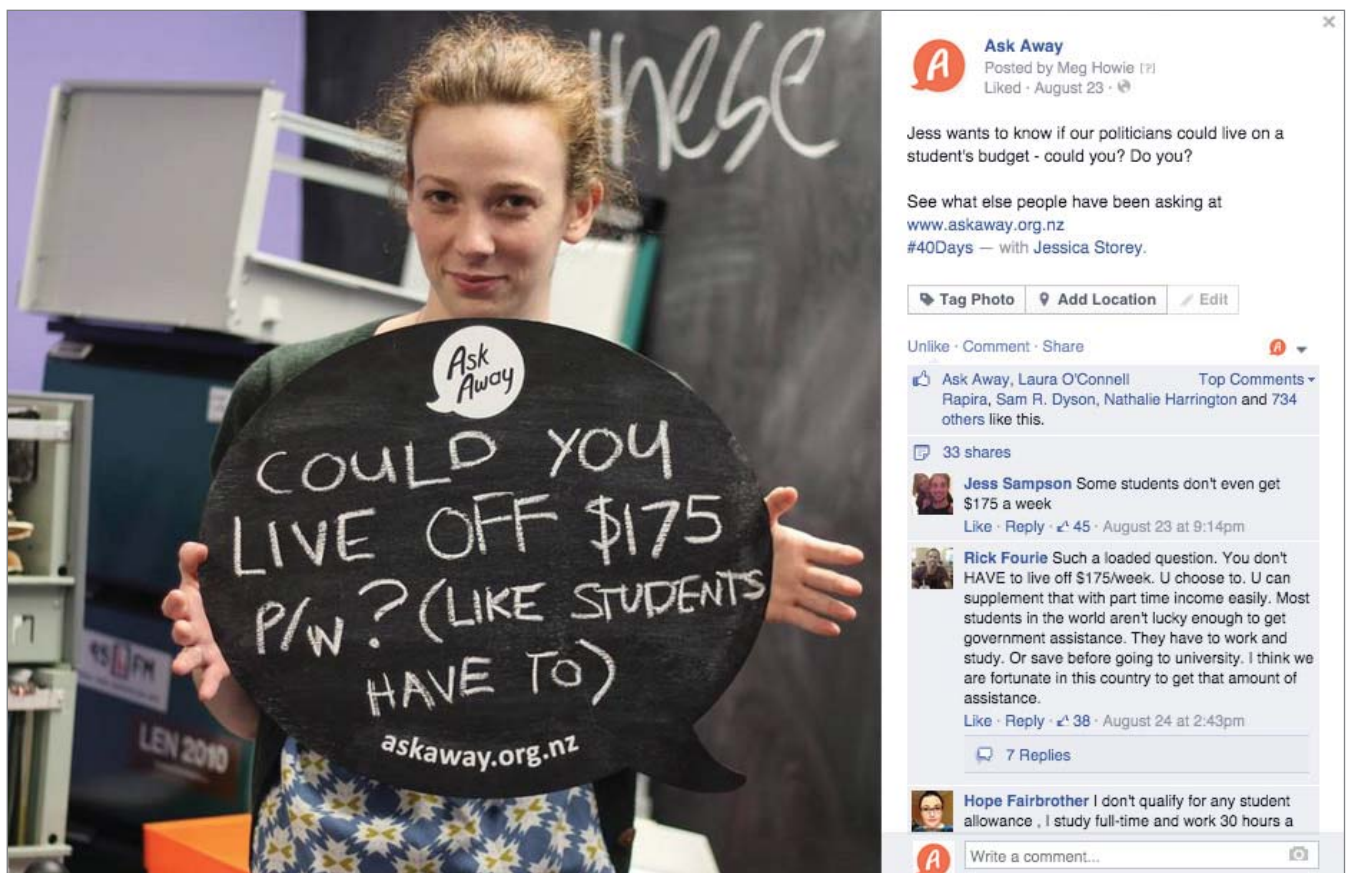


Figure 31. Jess's question for the parties. Screen capture from Facebook.

When there was a group championing an issue or a specific question on the site, they got noticeably more votes on questions, and more social media reach, which would have been seen by people outside of their networks. In the end, roughly half of the ten most voted questions of the site were promoted (although not asked by) various organisations, including Climate Vote campaign, TPPA No Way campaign, Secular NZ and JustSpeak.

Social media campaign

Marketing for the site was almost entirely through social media. The purpose for this was to create a social norm around voting by giving people a way to engage that was visible to their networks.

The strategy for marketing and communications was to amplify user content, and the main campaign was a series of fifty photos of (mostly) 18-24 year olds, holding a branded

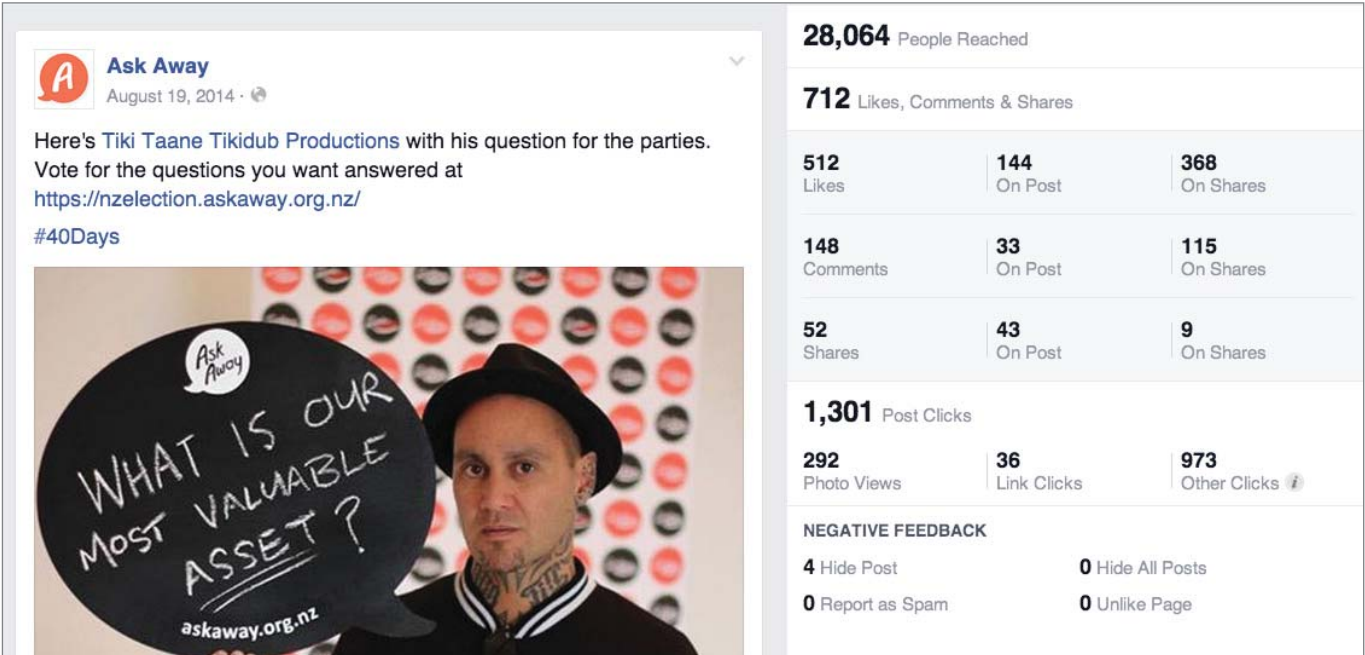
chalkboard with their questions for the parties (Figure 31). Using content generated by users ensured a diverse range of youth could see themselves (or people like them) on the platform. This was an attempt to address the issue of the perceived irrelevance of elections, both by exposing people to an image of someone they, and by promoting issues that, being raised by a young people, were likely to be relevant to other youth. Using real content also gave the marketing authenticity, a strategy that was also used by the Electoral Commission in their information campaign (Electoral Commission, July, 2014).

The photos were gathered from different locations around the country, meaning that as a new photo was shared each day a new person’s social network was exposed to the site. I visited the Kokiri Ngatahi Māori student group at Massey and gathered their questions to make sure rangatahi were represented. The images were promoted using Facebook’s promoted posts, meaning they reached a wider audience than

people already connected to the site, and the captions linked to the *Ask Away* site. Interspersed with these photos from the target audience were photos of musicians and comedians, also with their questions for the parties. The most successful of these was a photo of musician Tiki Taane, which reached 28,000 people. This image also sparked a large amount of discussion in comment threads, which fulfilled the goal of making political engagement visible. All the images are in Appendix Fifteen.

These images were also shared on Twitter. *Ask Away*’s presence on Twitter was useful in reaching a different audience. Through engaging in conversations around the election, and live tweeting debates, sharing election resources and memes, I was able to establish awareness about the project with political commentators, which in turn gave me leverage with the candidates. @AskAwayNZ was named one of the NZ Herald’s ‘Top 100 Tweeters to Follow this Election’, helping to give the brand credibility with both the non-initiated and political insiders (Edwards, 2014).

Figure 32. Tiki Taane’s questions for the parties. Screen capture from Facebook analytics.



Outcomes

Ask Away was live to the public between the 8th of August and the 20th of September in 2014, the six weeks leading up to New Zealand's General Election. Anyone could make an account and ask a question which was open for all the parties to answer. Visitors to the site could up-vote (endorse) the questions, without needing to login. Candidates from the nine largest parliamentary parties created accounts, logged in and answered on behalf of their party. Parties who participated were: National, Labour, Greens, Māori, NZ First, United Future, ACT, Conservatives, and Internet MANA. Data was gathered from a range of sources to test effectiveness.

Within the content generated by users on the site there were:

1098 questions

1166 answers

621 comments

60 candidate accounts

9 political parties

16,000 votes cast on questions

Common words from questions:

Kids/children/child 70

Health/healthier/healthcare 59

School/s 56

Student/s 54

Education 44

Tax 44

Change 41

Money 42

Job/s 32

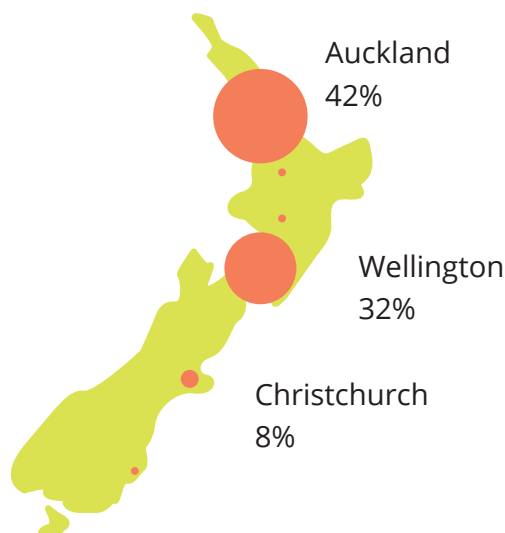


Figure 33. *The three main user locations.*

The three questions with the most votes were:

307 votes

What will you do to change New Zealand's climate change policies so that our gross emissions don't continue to increase?

266 votes

What is your strategy for tackling growing economic inequality?

229 votes

What is your stance on the Trans-Pacific Partnership?

From Google Analytics:

22,000 users

36,000 visits

100,000+ page views

38% of visits to the site came from returning visitors, and thousands visited three or more times.

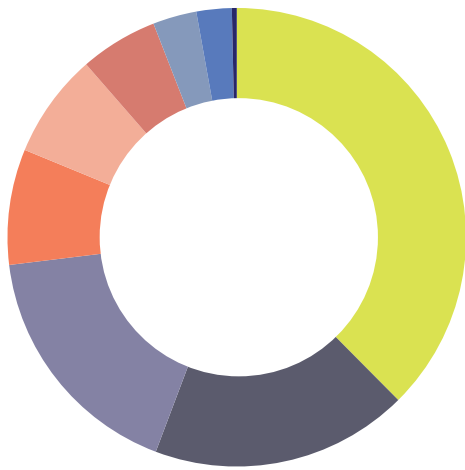
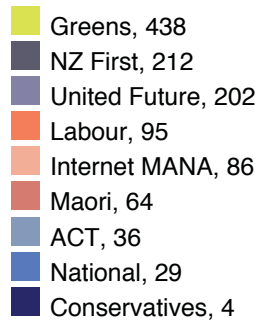


Figure 34. Number of answers from parties:



The top individual candidates for engagement were Tracey Martin from New Zealand First, with 212 answers, and Damian Light from United Future, with 198. For answers by party, see Figure 34.

The most answers given in one day was on the 3rd of September, when there were 56 answers contributed.

How effective was it at **reaching youth**?

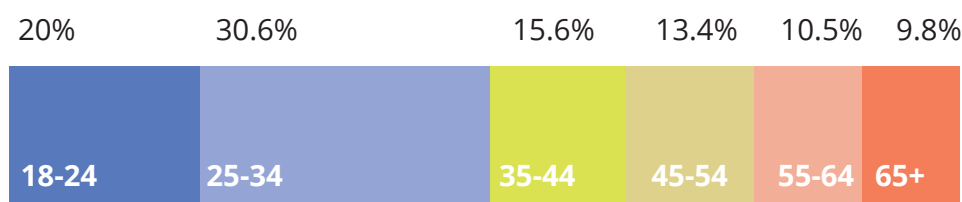
The site had a goal of reaching youth in the online spaces they were already occupying. The user research indicated that most young people got their information from either online news sites, or more often, Facebook. This goal was fairly successful; it was shared 345 times on Facebook, which made up 45% of the people who clicked through to *Ask Away* from another site, and a further 16% came from Twitter. 25.7% of the visitors came from a mobile or tablet device, showing that it could be used in a convenient time and place for users.

Where it was less successful was reaching a

younger audience. 25-34 year olds were the most common visitors to the site, making up 30.6% of visitors, and 18-24 year olds were next with 20%. However, the largest group of referral traffic came from 18-24 year olds coming from Facebook (7.32%), closely followed by 25-34 yr olds on Facebook (7.2%). This suggests that the effort put into targeted marketing to that demographic did work, but that it was naturally more appealing to a slightly older bracket. One reason for this might be the website was appealing to those who are already politically engaged, and there are higher numbers of those in the older age bracket. This would be consistent with turnout levels in previous elections.

Another tension here was the partnership with Radio New Zealand. The bulk of their web viewers are well over the age range *Ask Away* was targeting, but collaboration meant extra mana for the site, and leverage with the parties. The decision to partner with RNZ was based on the principle of inclusiveness: *Ask Away* was not intending to create a discussion space exclusive to

Figure 35. Age breakdown of users.



young people, but an inclusive space where youth in particular felt welcome. Embedding content from the site onto the RNZ site was not going to interfere with this, so we went ahead.

How effective was it at **informing** youth?

The strategies used to make the information easier to digest and find were: reducing cognitive load, limiting answer length, and information architecture.

“Yay! Can understand lil bit about this politics game now.”

@eflalau on Twitter

While the content itself was out of our control, we did everything we could to make it easier to process. Having an easy to use site leaves more mental processing power for the content (Tuch et al, 2012) so the interface design was as intuitive as possible, and we conducted user testing which resulted in refining the interactions, particularly up voting (See the user testing script in Appendix Four).

The length of questions was limited to 140 characters and answers to 350 characters. This meant that questions could be scrolled through quickly, meaning users had a better chance of finding content they found interesting faster. This short answer format was a challenge for some of the candidates, one of whom emailed me through three word documents and a PowerPoint presentation with the message “I hope this answers your question”. Of course, this is behaviour that

is learned over time, and with many politicians learning social media skills, this brief, two-way interaction should come more naturally over time.

Having answers from multiple parties next to each other was another part of making it easier for users to contextualise information and make a comparative decision. As opposed to needing to visit separate party websites to find party positions, potentially with very different terms of reference, seeing different answers to the same question meant users could see the difference much more easily. One user said, “it gave you more insight into what’s going to happen if you vote for them”, and another “that’s quite interesting, you can see like how they all contrast”. There was some criticism that parties were all essentially promising the same things, but this is potentially more a fault of a political environment where the two major parties are both centrist, something outside the scope of this brief.

How effective was it at **engaging** youth?

Overall, feedback from users was extremely positive. One user emailed to say

“I think *Ask Away* is the best thing to happen to NZ political participation since women got the vote!”

Another user Tweeted, “This is totally brilliant ... Anything that gets people engaged with politics, and gets politicians engaged with voters concerns, is a good thing.”

Were young people asking questions?

The age of visitors to the 'ask a question' page on Google Analytics reflects the overall site visits, 34.6% of visits were from 25-34 yr olds, followed by 23.8% from 18-24 year olds, showing that young people were taking part in the conversation.

What I did find when I was conducting video interviews with first time users was that although people were able to find relevant information once they had looked for a little while, it was not immediately obvious. That first impression would have put many people off. I asked a young first time user to talk me through what she was thinking as she used the site, and she said as she scrolled: "well I don't know what carbon emissions are, TPPA? That means nothing to me". I assume that if I had not been standing there she would have given up at that point, but she found a question about domestic violence and child abuse that caught her attention, and when she clicked to see the answers there was an "Oh! Cool!" moment. This same process was echoed with another user later that day. I could see that not understanding the first few questions was very off-putting and made people feel defensive.

This was definitely a big challenge for the site, and an attempt to remedy it was made through the social media content. With over fifty different youth photographed in different cities, at different universities and events, there was a diverse and authentic representation of 'youth issues', which hopefully helped increase perceived relevance of election issues (Appendix Fifteen).

The social media posts were making visible both the concerns of young people and the act of political engagement and inquiry.

They created **365,000** impressions on Facebook, as well as a significant reach on Twitter, and **8,400** actions, which includes Likes, Comments, Shares and website clicks, all measures of online engagement.

Engagement Before and After Survey

A survey was also conducted with a class of photography students. The aim of this survey was to have some quantitative measure of the effectiveness of the site in building political efficacy and engagement. The survey was based on one which the Electoral Commission uses to judge the effects of its "Kids Vote" programme, where children participate in mock elections in schools (Appendix Twelve). It asks respondents to state on a scale of 1-4 their opinion. The students were then asked to visit the site before the next survey. The table in Figure 36 shows the change in response after a week. The survey can be found in Appendix Eight, the full results in Appendix Nine and the demographics of respondents in Appendix Five.

While the sample size is small, these results indicate a consistent increase in engagement in those who visited the site, particularly to the questions 'is politics interesting?' and 'is politics easy to understand?'. The first survey was conducted on the 11th of

Before and After Engagement Surveys

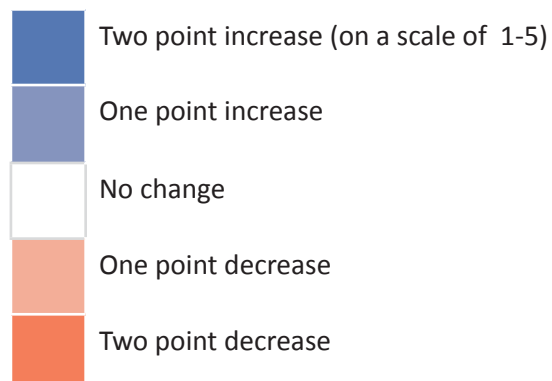


Figure 36. *Change in engagement after visiting Ask Away.*

	Are politics interesting?	Easy to understand?	Does your vote make a difference?	Have you talked to friends & family?	How likely are you to vote?	Do you think politicians care what you say?	Are politics relevant to you?
Visited AA							
Participant 1							
Participant 2							
Participant 3							
Participant 4							
Participant 5							
Participant 6							
Participant 7							
Participant 8							
Participant 9							
Did not visit AA							
Participant 10							
Participant 11							
Participant 12							
Participant 13							

September and the second on the 18th, two days before the election, so it is to be expected that engagement would increase during this time, but surprisingly, it decreases in three out of four participants who did not visit the site.

I considered whether it was the students who were more engaged to begin with who visited the site, and therefore who encountered greater growth in engagement due to other activities. If ‘engaged’ is defined as scoring three or above in four or more of the seven questions, then Figure 37 shows the change during the week. Highlighted are those who became ‘engaged’ between surveys — showing it was not just those who were already engaged who visited the site.

Although the sample size is less than ideal, this survey provides a framework for evaluation that could be scaled up in the next iteration of the platform.

The site was also used by some teachers, and proved an effective resource for younger children. One year five teacher said:

“The class really loved getting responses to their questions and many of them went home and created their own personal accounts and asked further questions.

Visited AA	Engaged before	Engaged after
Participant 1	Y	Y
Participant 2	N	N
Participant 3	N	N
Participant 4	N	Y
Participant 5	N	Y
Participant 6	N	Y
Participant 7	Y	Y
Participant 8	Y	Y
Participant 9	N	Y
Did not visit AA		
Participant 10	Y	N
Participant 11	N	N
Participant 12	N	Y
Participant 13	N	N

Figure 37. Students who became engaged after a one week period.

I was very impressed with how much it opened the level of communication up with their families as well. At least half of the class had political discussions with family members and had them also get involved in what they were asking on *Ask Away*.” (C Palmer, personal communication, November 12, 2014).

An opportunity here would be to reframe the platform as a tool for students. This would help solve the issue of people being put off by questions in inaccessible language. International research found that “The effect of using participatory methods in civic education on efficacy and participation was clear: the more participatory methods used, the greater the impact.” (Sabatini et al, 1998, p. 51). This suggests there an interactive tool like *Ask Away* would make an excellent social sciences resource.

Alternatively ELI5 (Explain Like I'm 5) is a Reddit (see Appendix One) subcategory where users ask questions that they want simple, layman's answers to. Although we tried to seed this kind of approach on *Ask Away*, it could be done more explicitly in future.

Non-negative media

Something that emerged throughout the campaign was the potential for *Ask Away* to play a role outside of conflict politics. This theme came through in the initial timeline interviews I conducted — young people often expressed how put off they were by the squabbling and negativity that mainstream media and political campaigns focus on. I identified at that point the opportunity to offer an alternative to this.

This theme was highlighted during the 2014 campaign with the publication of "Dirty Politics" by Nicky Hager. This book alleged that for several years, 'attack politics' were being carried out by right wing bloggers and coordinated by the National Party. In this context, negative politics became not just an unfortunate coincidence of our political system but a strategic plan. Simon Lusk, a political consultant, is quoted in the book explaining the advantages of negative campaigning. "There are a few basic propositions with negative campaigning that are worth knowing about. It lowers turnout, favours right more than left as the right continues to turn out, and drives away the independents." (Lusk cited in Hager, 2014, p.18). The main blogger named in the book, Cameron Slater, blogged about his views on youth political engagement (and this project) in response to an op-ed written by myself and Kieran Stowers. His blog was titled

"Healthy, well adjusted young people should not be interested in politics" (Slater, 2014).

Aside from this, the leaders debates were criticised as "ill moderated shouting matches" @citizenbomber on Twitter. Jolisa Gracewood asked "Why are leaders' debates judged on a FPP [First Past the Post] scorecard (win! lose!) In an MMP world (collaboration, consensus, the greater good)?" Smaller parties are excluded altogether, and often complain about the difficulty of getting coverage (Martin, personal communication, 2014, Appendix Thirteen). Under an MMP system where there was only 13% difference between the second and third largest parties in 2014, it makes little sense for these presidential style debates to be such a central part of the coverage.

This political and media environment clearly had room for an alternative. One user described the leader's debates as "two old men just bitching at each other", and in contrast, another said (about *Ask Away*) "This is quite interesting because it gives everyone a fair chance to say what they want to say."

Tracey Martin, Deputy Leader of the New Zealand First Party, said

"It is widely recognised that to gain traction inside main stream media one often has to create a 'gottcha point'... This coupled with the persistence of the... 'there are only two parties' type of reporting means that

initiatives such as *Ask Away* are vital to a truly MMP environment."

(Appendix Thirteen)

PICK AND MIX

Apps and sites battle for youth vote

GED CANN

RECENT antics at Internet Party events have raised concerns about how young people engage with politics.

But two campaigns launched in Wellington paint a more positive picture of young people's willingness to engage in constructive debate.

The Ask Away and On the Fence campaigns have already recorded 77,000 visits between them.

On the Fence is an interactive tool that matches the user with a party based on their perspective on different issues. On the Fence leader Kieran Stowers says the time users are spending on the site is also an indicator of interest in political issues.

"Visitors are spending eight minutes on the site on average, engaging on topics from social welfare to environment. It's really positive."

Ask Away aims to open communications between young



5 MINUTE QUIZ

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test your local knowledge
www.dompst.co.nz/capital

50 YEARS
MASSIVE
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

1. Which word associated with WW1 can precede coat, foot or mouth?
2. Which town is higher: Queenst or Taupo?
3. Was Jelly Roll Morton a musician or a comedian?
4. In what famous motor race did drivers once have to sprint to the cars at the start?
5. Which 1964 hit song mentions Chicago, New Orleans, New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore and "DC"?
6. In Scrabble, which letter is worth most: X, Y or Z?
7. Which is New Zealand's third biggest winemaking region after Marlborough and Hawke's Bay: Gisborne, Central Otago or Nelson?
8. Complete the three-word command used by rugby referees: scrum time: Crouch, blind, -.

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Young political voice aim of website

STACEY KNOTT

Last updated 12:28 20/08/2014



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Looking For A New Bait Board? Check Out Our Range Online Today!

A former Nelson College for Girls' dux is helping young people get answers to their important questions this year, straight from the politicians vying for their votes.

Since leaving school as dux in 2008, Meg Howie has been studying design in Wellington where she is the project leader on a campaign aimed at encouraging and informing young voters.

She is behind the **Ask Away** website, launched this month, which allows anyone to ask a question and have it answered by politicians on the election trail.

The website aims to be an easy way to find out the parties'

NEWS SOCIETY CULTURE COMMENT AUDIO VIDEO

THE WIRELESS ELECTION

FEATURE

Ask Away and The Wireless
Monday 11th August 2014

What questions would you ask political parties if you could? What are the burning issues that will help decide your vote?

Is it housing, the environment, education, poverty, the economy? Are you more interested in gender equality or LGBT rights? Legalising cannabis, amending the TPPA, or making Te Reo compulsory in schools?

The Wireless is teaming up with **Ask Away** so you can ask those questions directly to the politicians. In the weeks leading up to the election, we'll be featuring the trending questions, and highlighting the issues that people are interested in.

JOIN THE DISCUSSION
Discuss, comment and read comments about this article.
1 comment

SHARE
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If you were to become the prime minister, would you change the GCSB bill and the relationship between NZ & USA? If so what would you change?
asked by Ben James 5 months ago · 2 comments · f w Share

Do you think there are National Security Agency facilities in New Zealand?
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Out of the echo chamber
Is protesting more or less relevant in the digital age, when everyone has a platform?

How to get out the vote?
Not knowing, not understanding and not caring are some of the reasons people opt not to vote. Is it possible to change the trend?

The value of your vote
If you don't vote, do you have any right to complain about what politicians do? Join us for a panel discussion.

Young and brash
The Wireless and VUWISA gather members of the political youth wings for a debate.

Inequality
Not only can politicians not agree on what to do about inequality in New Zealand, they can't agree on whether it exists.

TEARAWAY THE VOICE OF NZ YOUTH

ALL THE BRIGHT PLACES
The story of a very quiet town and a very loud voice

About News Local Tearaway TV Sport Culture Study/Careers Advice Games/Tech Gallery

Under 18? You Can Still Have Your Say!

Home Slider Under 18? You Can Still Have Your Say!

Posted on Sep 1, 2014

Ask Away is a new website that lets young people and political parties get talking. Don't miss your chance to be involved in this year's General Election.

New Zealand's parties are answering your questions this election on a new website called **Ask Away**. Designer Meg Howie wanted to make politics more interesting, so she came up with the idea of letting people ask the parties questions about the things they care about. "So much of what the parties talk about isn't relevant to young people," she says. "I want to change that."

Ask Away is designed to make it easy to get informed and have a say, so that everyone's ready to vote in the election. "Even if you don't have your own question, you can vote for questions that you want answered, so you help decide what the parties will talk about," Meg says. "Even if you can't vote yet, that shouldn't stop you from being a part of the conversation."

Ask Away

Figure 38. Media coverage of Ask Away. See Appendix Two for full list and sources.

Public profile

The *Ask Away* platform, alongside *On the Fence*, received a large amount of publicity. 9.3% of referral traffic came from either radionz.co.nz or thewireless.co.nz, and it was repeatedly profiled on RNZ programmes. It also featured in a story on TV3 show Campbell Live along with *On the Fence*, as well as the Dominion Post, The Wellingtonian, The Nelson Mail, Design Assembly, Idealog, Bfm, Radio@ctive, National Business Review, the NZ Herald and on Campbell Live. It also appeared in student media Salient at Victoria University and Te Waha Nui at AUT.

Content from the website was also used by TV One in their story on secular education. This was interesting, as a group, Secular NZ, had asked a question on *Ask Away*, shared it with their followers and received answers from the parties. They then used the answers to formulate a press release which TV One then ran on their website — although without acknowledging *Ask Away*.

This is an example of how this kind of tool can be used to give airtime to issues that are otherwise not discussed. In a perfect new media feedback loop, Matthew Beveridge then blogged about the article as an example of social media influencing mainstream media (Beveridge, 2014).

What makes *Ask Away* unique?

There is a proliferation of engagement platforms online, so it was important to make sure the project was not replicating the work of others. *Ask Away* sat alongside the *On the Fence* guide tool as a next step, offering a more specific, in-depth and personal way to learn more about the parties. The main difference between *Ask Away* and similar international sites (see Appendix One) is the ability to ask open questions and then compare a range of answers. This framing is less antagonistic than posing direct questions, because it encourages a certain type of question.

Figure 39. TVNZ. 2014. *Campbell Live Feature on On the Fence and Ask Away*. Screen capture from TVNZ OnDemand.



When analysing the word frequency in the questions, 'how will you', 'what is your' and 'will your party' were the top three phrases, all less confrontational than 'why did you' or 'why won't you' questions.

This was important for two groups of users. Firstly, it made it less likely that any one party would feel attacked on the site, encouraging participation across the spectrum. There was still some negative questions directed at specific parties, but these were exceptions to the rule. Secondly, the user research identified that young people view politics as an 'ugly industry' and are turned off by conflict focussed media. Framing the discussion in this open way meant they could see it as a balanced information source, rather than a place for opinionated people to attack the parties. People gave feedback on the quality of the discussion in the site comments. Comments were, on the whole, respectful and intelligent, with minimal moderation needed. It is certainly worth considering which elements, designed or unintentional, led to this quality of civic conversation.

The other major difference between *Ask Away* and international counterparts is in site architecture. With a goal of lowering barriers to entry to political participation, it was important to get the content right out on the homepage. *AskThem* and *OurSay*, both require several clicks to get to any user generated content (Appendix One). Early research suggested that a news source was more appealing than an opportunity for engagement to most, so, like a news site, content came first. We wanted to create a social norm by making the participation of others visible, so again, signs of

life (in the form of user generated content) needed to be front and centre to create the impression that 'everyone is doing this'.

Lastly, there is also a difference in the immediacy of the interaction. The other petition sites take around a month to get from questions to answers. We wanted the connection to feel more conversational and direct, and used social media models to set expectations around the timeframes of interactions, getting it down to two or three days.

Impact on turnout

Finally, is there any evidence that the tide of youth voter disengagement was stemmed?

Turnout overall rose by 3%, and is suggested to have risen 5-8% amongst 18-24 year olds (Blake-Kelly & Whelan, 2015). The election was notable for the array of new youth voter engagement initiatives, including the Virgin Voter Collective (see Collaborations, p. 12). The platform undeniably provided a platform for youth voices and hosted approximately 200 questions from 18-24 year olds.

Along with an overall rise in turnout, the two electorates geographically closest to the project, Rongotai and Wellington Central, had turnouts of (enrolled) 18-24 year olds at 77% and 85% respectively. This is significantly higher than the national average for this age group of 62.7% (Electoral Commission, 2015). While the Auckland had the highest percentage of visits to the site, Wellington followed with 30% of visits, a number disproportionate to its size. This suggests a local effect of marketing in the Wellington region.

Reflections

Role of the designer

Interestingly, there was room in this project for two distinct design roles. The work of the 'interface designer' or even the broader 'user experience designer' was primarily done by Jon Lemmon (also the technical lead).

Jon's work was visually focussed and involved detailed refinement of placement, balance and hierarchy of scale. This is very much in line with the traditional perception of the master-designer, who uses technical skills and specialist knowledge to fill an individual role.

I worried that I should be doing more of this, that as a 'design project' this clearly demarcated space should be my primary domain. However, the scope of this project means that that was neither possible, nor, with the skills Jon brought to the project, would it have meant the best outcome.

In their 2006 paper, the UK Design Council describe a new paradigm, Transformational Design. This "doesn't look or feel much like design in the familiar sense of the word" (Burns et al., p. 36).

"A new design discipline is emerging. It builds on traditional design skills to address social and economic issues. It uses the design process as a means to enable a wide range of disciplines and stakeholders to collaborate."

In 2015, this is not a controversial concept, and service designers, design thinkers and innovation specialists are spreading throughout organisations. These designers tend to focus less on designed objects and more on systems, journeys and experiences, which makes it harder to describe what it is they actually do.

I suggest this process is the same as any creation process. Material comes in, is worked, moulded and made sense of, then goes out. Where design differs from other non-'creative' disciplines is in its open boundaries. When gathering material, a political science thesis, a screenshot from pop culture website BuzzFeed and a hand drawn timeline from a target user were all sitting on my desktop alongside each other. 'Expert' knowledge is considered alongside conversations had at parties, posters on the street and observations of online behaviour.

This flexibility places designers in a different position to subject matter specialists. Rather than perpetuating the authority of one discourse, designers process a huge variety of information from different sources. This is what positions them as collaboration enablers – they are equipped to work in the spaces in-between.

Due to the variety of material coming in, designers need a large array of tools to make sense of it. These tools are taught, borrowed from other disciplines, or invented. In the first few months of the project I spent a lot of time processing information. Mind mapping, user journeys, visual audits, affinity mapping, personas, Venn diagrams, conversations and written reflections were all used to work with the material I was gathering.

This work is framing, synthesising, connecting and sense making. The next strength of the designer is their ability to create outputs that again, facilitate communication between different groups. For example, to translate technical concepts about the implications of open sourcing the project for the university's stakeholders, I created a diagram using a box metaphor to illustrate the components of a site (Figure 40). To communicate to the developers the different types of users and their needs, personas based on four cats synthesised the user research into relatable personalities. And of course, the main output, the web application, was created to enable communication between candidates and youth in a mutually manageable way.

These outputs could be anything. In this project they included websites, Tweets, interviews given to reporters, infographics, emails and flyers. Again, I argue flexibility is more valuable to designers in this space than expertise.

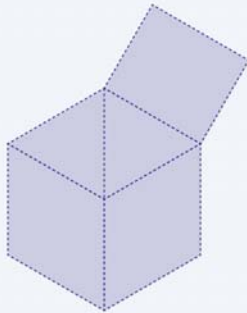
Another skill not to be overlooked here is *manaakitanga*, or hospitality. One part of encouraging participation from stakeholders is making their contribution feel unique and valued (Masli & Terveen, 2012). When hosting 'hack nights' (collaborative coding events with volunteers), there was always food and drink provided. Creating a sense of momentum and buzz around the project was another way of drawing people in, making it something people wanted to be a part of.

Finally, this process of data in to data out is not linear. The flow of material in is constant, as are the phases of sense making

and communicating. As soon as something has been sent out, its reception or interaction with its audience becomes more data in, to be fed through the process again.

Design outputs pass through phases of design, development and testing, but they can never be finished objects, because the people and systems around them are never static.

Bits of an app



Source Code

What is it?

The blueprints for the site, all the functionality (the Ruby on Rails) with all the layout (the CSS and JS). An empty shell with minimal branding.

Who does it belong to?

Contributor's complete Contributor Agreements that assign copyright to the project.

Who can use it?

Under the AGPL open source license, anyone can use the source code, for free, including for commercial purposes, and no one can stop future people from using it for free.

Where does it live?

On Github, which is a site where code can be stored, downloaded and contributed to, in an open repository.



2014 Instance

What is it?

A version of the site, using a copy of the source code, but live on a server. It has visual branding specific to the election and any media partners added on top of the base styling.

Who does it belong to?

This is more the responsibility of Maisey University and Meg's project. It is also something that could be partly owned by a media partner. IP laws would apply to protect the visual identity of the site.

Who can use it?

This site is public as it is on the internet for anyone to find and interact with.

Where does it live?

On a server.



Dynamic Content

What is it?

All the content that users generate when they interact with the site.

Who does it belong to?

By default I think the same people who own the instance of the site would have the rights to the content.

Who can use it?

This can be freely available for anyone to use and share under a Creative Commons license, with attribution to the source (which might include attributing media partners).

Where does it live?

In the database on the server with the rest of this instance of the site. It is publically viewable through the website.



Metrics

What is it?

All the information gathered about the way users interact with the site.

Who does it belong to?

Whoever the instance of the site belongs to, and also Google and Facebook.

Who can use it?

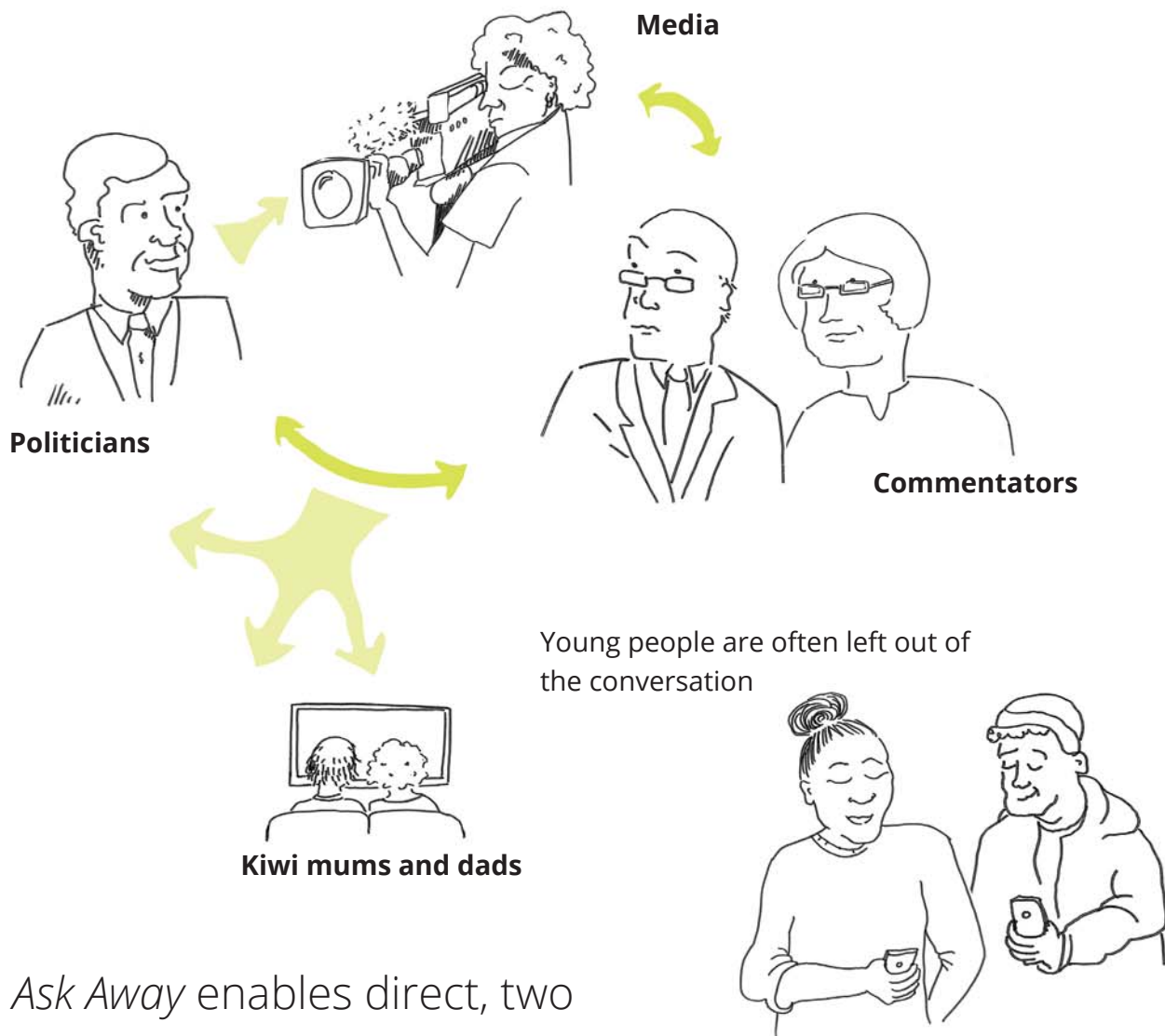
Whoever the owners of the site give access to - any interested research institutions or agencies to begin with, but it also has commercial potential.

Where does it live?

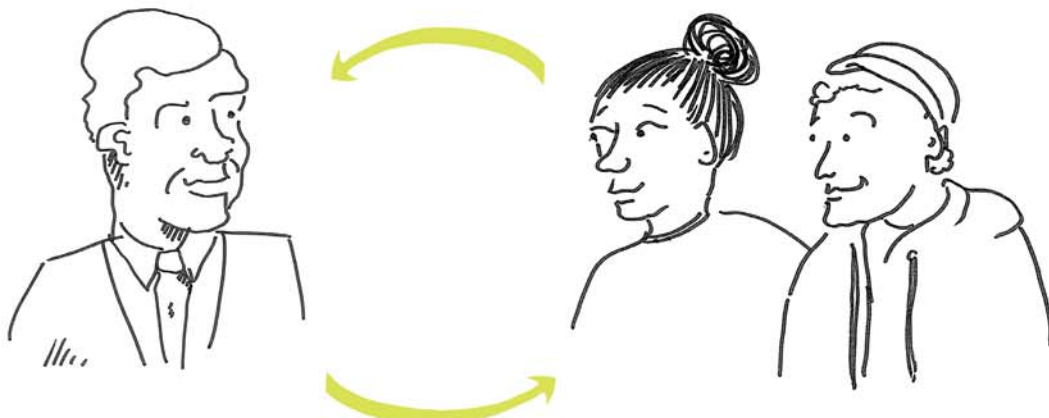
In the Google Analytics and Facebook Insights accounts attached to the site. This can be exported to CSV or PDF too.

Figure 40. Diagram to show components of Open Source code.

Traditional media landscape



Ask Away enables direct, two way communication on young people's own terms.



Future steps and implications

Forms of participation like *Ask Away* are a natural progression for our democratic systems. This thesis argues that if placing a vote on Election Day is to be desirable and meaningful, citizens must be invited to participate in a broader context. By lowering the thresholds to being involved, opportunities are created to build political efficacy: individuals can grow their confidence in their ability to know what's going on, be heard and make a difference. At the same time, a paradigm shift towards open participation is influencing every aspect of society, including politics. *Ask Away* is situated in this emergent space, where everyone has a voice, communication goes both ways and communication is many to many rather than broadcast from afar.

There is plenty more work that could be done to develop the tool, particularly around sustaining user relationships with the platform over time. I would like to add email digests for users of answers to questions they have voted for. More emphasis on continuing discussions with candidates beyond the initial answer and inclusion of representatives from different levels of government outside of election time are also possible next steps.

There was a tension that has not been resolved yet between curating accessible content and language and allowing users an unmediated forum. The platform was used beyond its original purpose, and might be better suited as a youth inclusive rather than youth specific tool. Alternatively, the context of the tool could be changed, by limiting the use of the site to a specific group.

This will be explored in the next phase of *Ask Away* — as a resource for intermediate age school children. Funding has been granted by Internet NZ, a “voice for the internet in New Zealand” (Internet NZ, n.d.) to develop teacher resources and promote the resource to schools. This iteration has a different audience, different set of stakeholders and collaborators, and will require different techniques to gather, analyse and communicate ideas.

There is also interest from the United Kingdom and Australia in running versions of the platform there, as well as approaching Presidential Elections in the United States and Local Body Elections in New Zealand.

Ask Away hosted a unique discussion leading up to the 2014 General Election, and raised the visibility of youth participation both on the site and social media. By connecting young people, the wider public, political candidates, media, commentators, civil society organisations and software developers, this work demonstrates how design processes can be used to facilitate collaboration and innovation in the civic space. It shows how human and user centred design can be used to define and deliver value to diverse groups, and finally, how technology can be used to enable participation and engagement.

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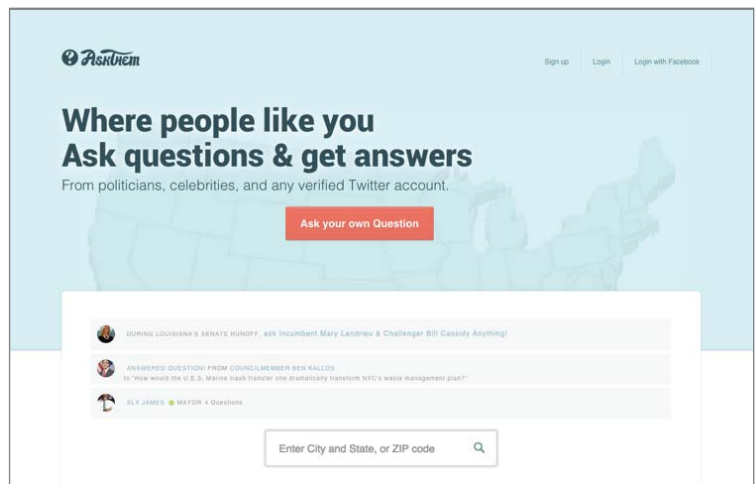
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Appendix One: Precedents

AskThem

Also an open source project, AskThem allows the public to petition their elected representatives at any level of government. It asks for a form of participation that feels weightier — signing on to a question, which much reach a threshold to be delivered to the representative the question is addressed to.



OurSay

OurSay is an Australian platform where questions can be put to any public figures or groups, including politicians, celebrities, councils and companies. Users can vote on questions, and the winning questions are answered by video stream.



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On the Fence

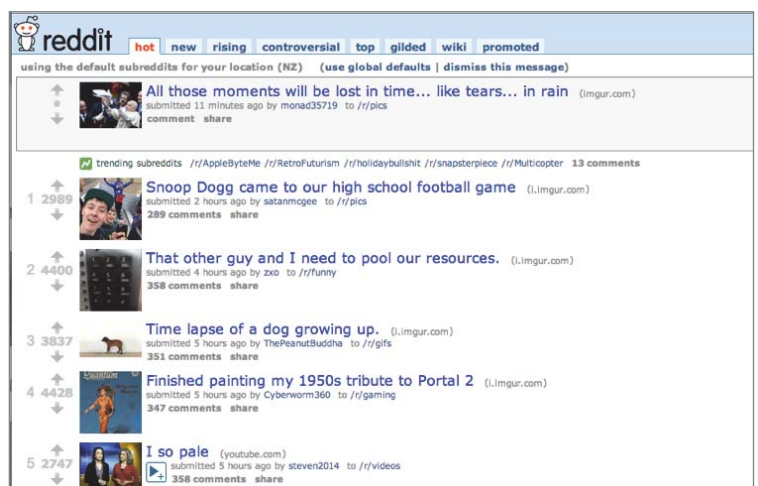
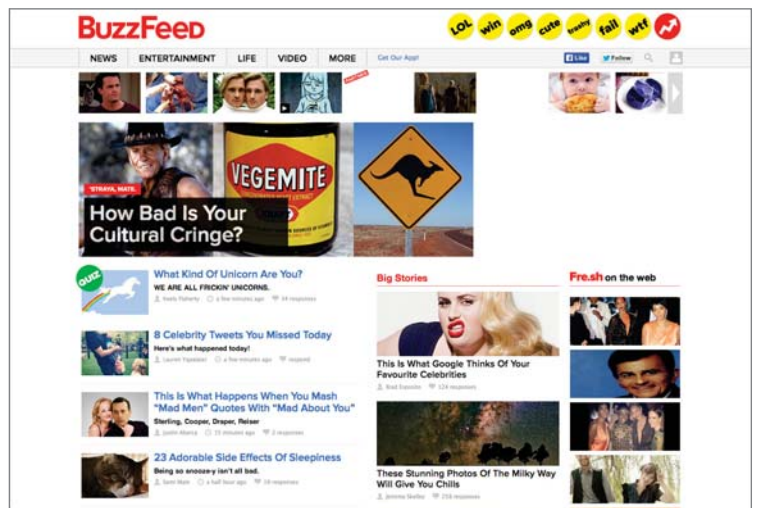
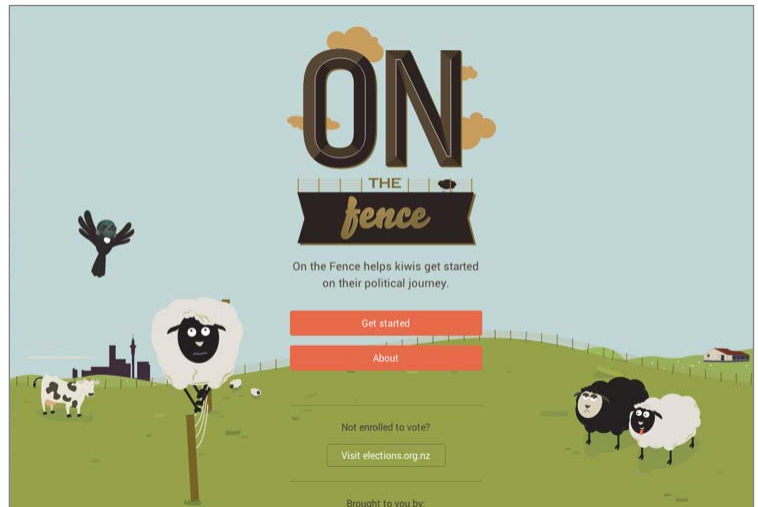
On the Fence “is a fun web tool that educates and guides you to find a best match from New Zealand’s political parties” (On the Fence, 2014). It was the partner project to *Ask Away* within the Design & Democracy Project, and each site linked to the other. Users click through an animated questionnaire and indicate their preferences for policy positions. On completion, they are given the three parties which most closely match their selections. *On the Fence* was extremely successful at attracting young voters, with over 100,000 visitors during the six weeks prior to polling day.

Buzzfeed

Pop culture website. See page 26.

Reddit

Reddit is a content sharing site where users can up-vote content submitted by others. It hosts Ask Me Anything sessions (AMAs) which are occasionally used by politicians to connect with people online. Some news media adopted this format and hosted Q and A sessions in New Zealand in 2014.



Appendix Two: Media coverage

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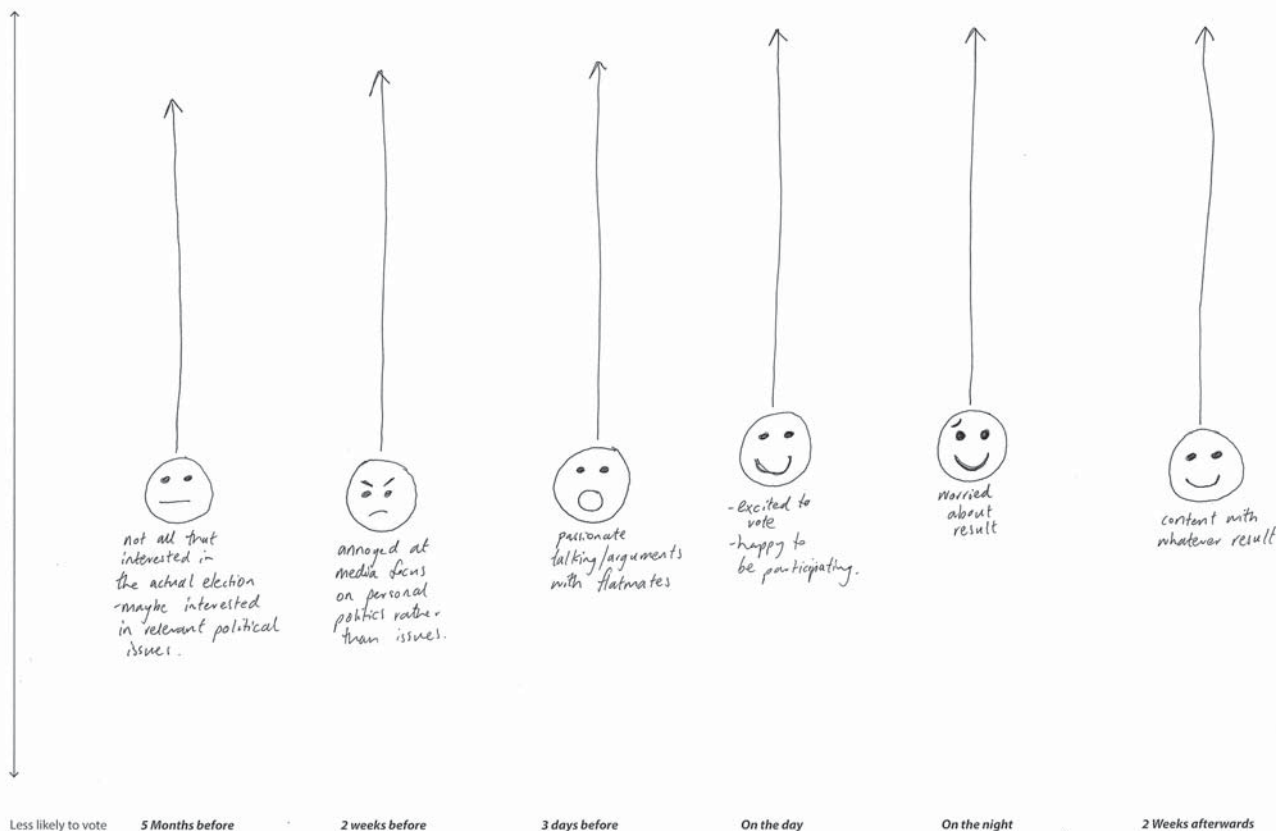
Appendix Three: Timelines

More likely to vote



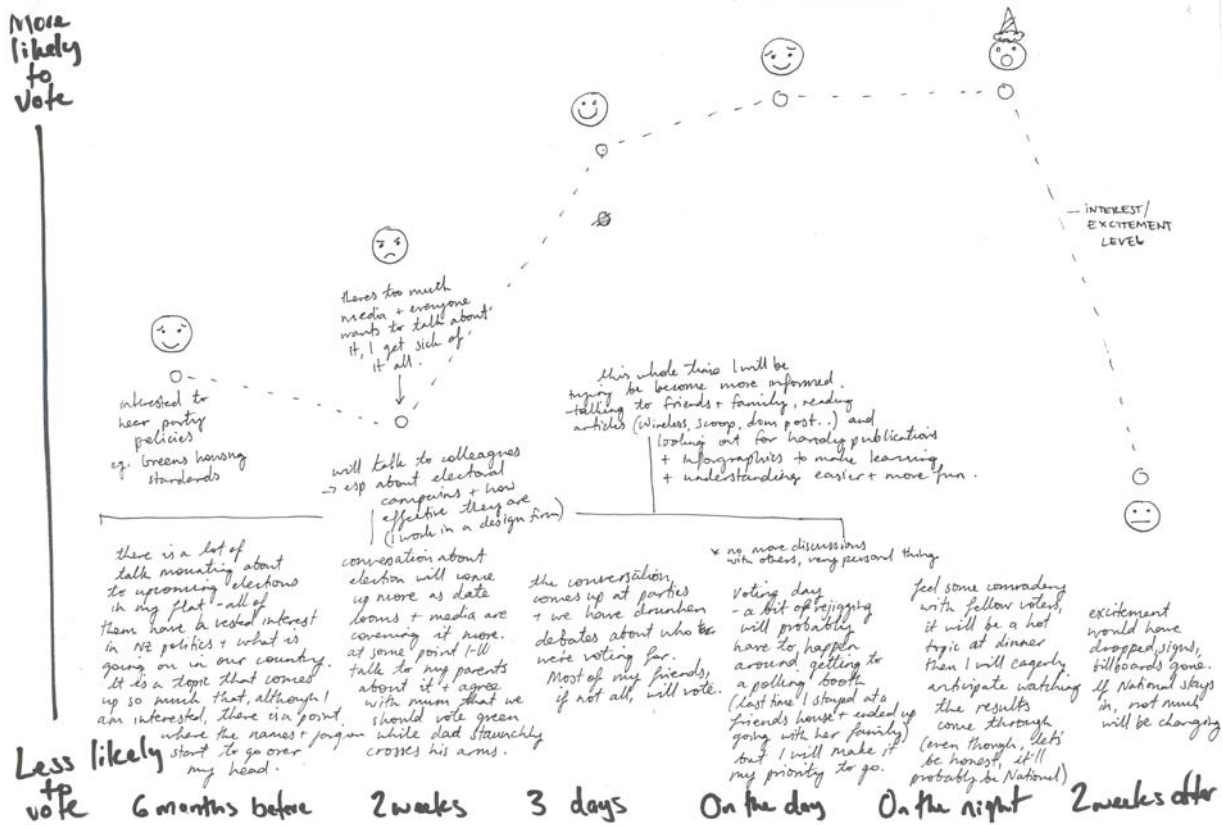
23 yrs, male, Pakeha, Gisbourne*

More likely to vote

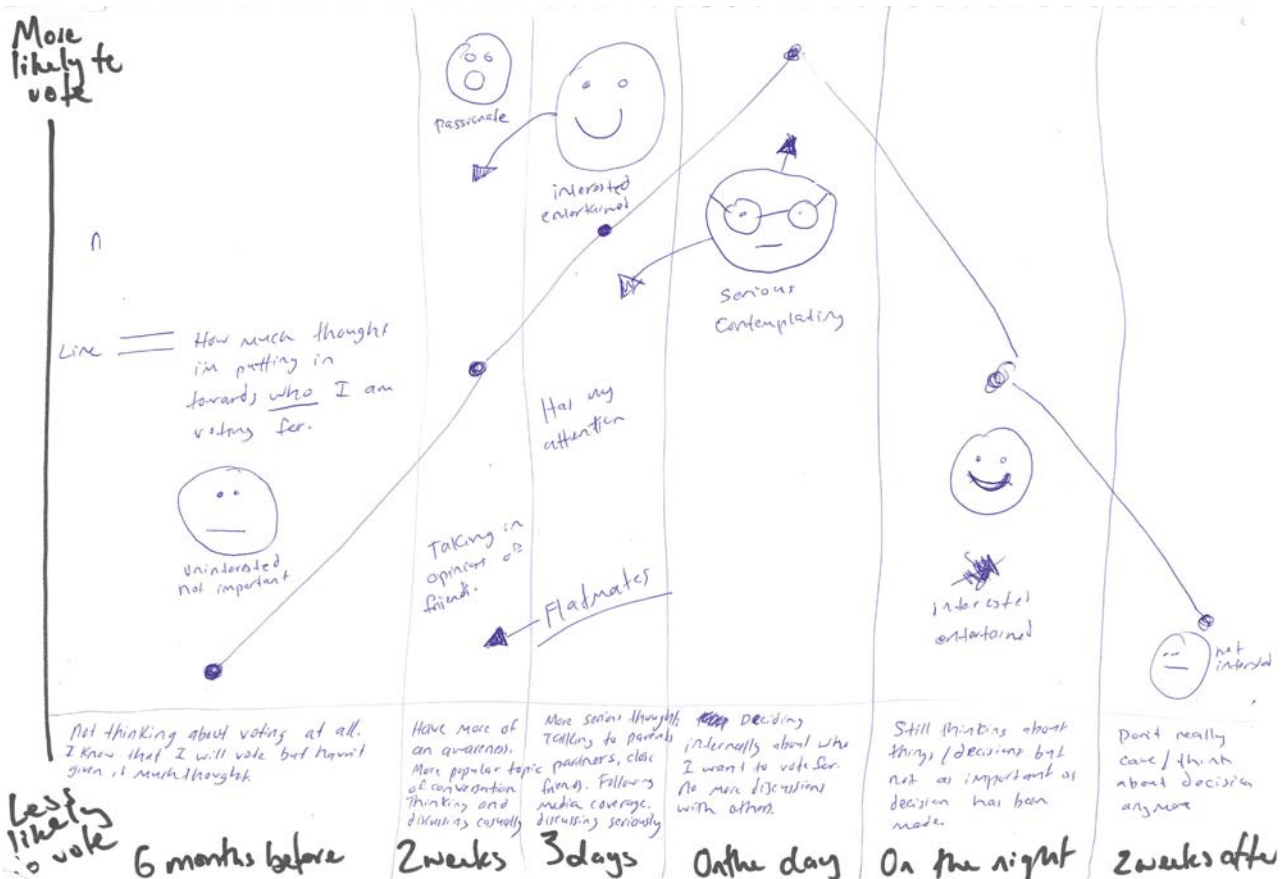


22 yrs, male, Pakeha, Auckland*

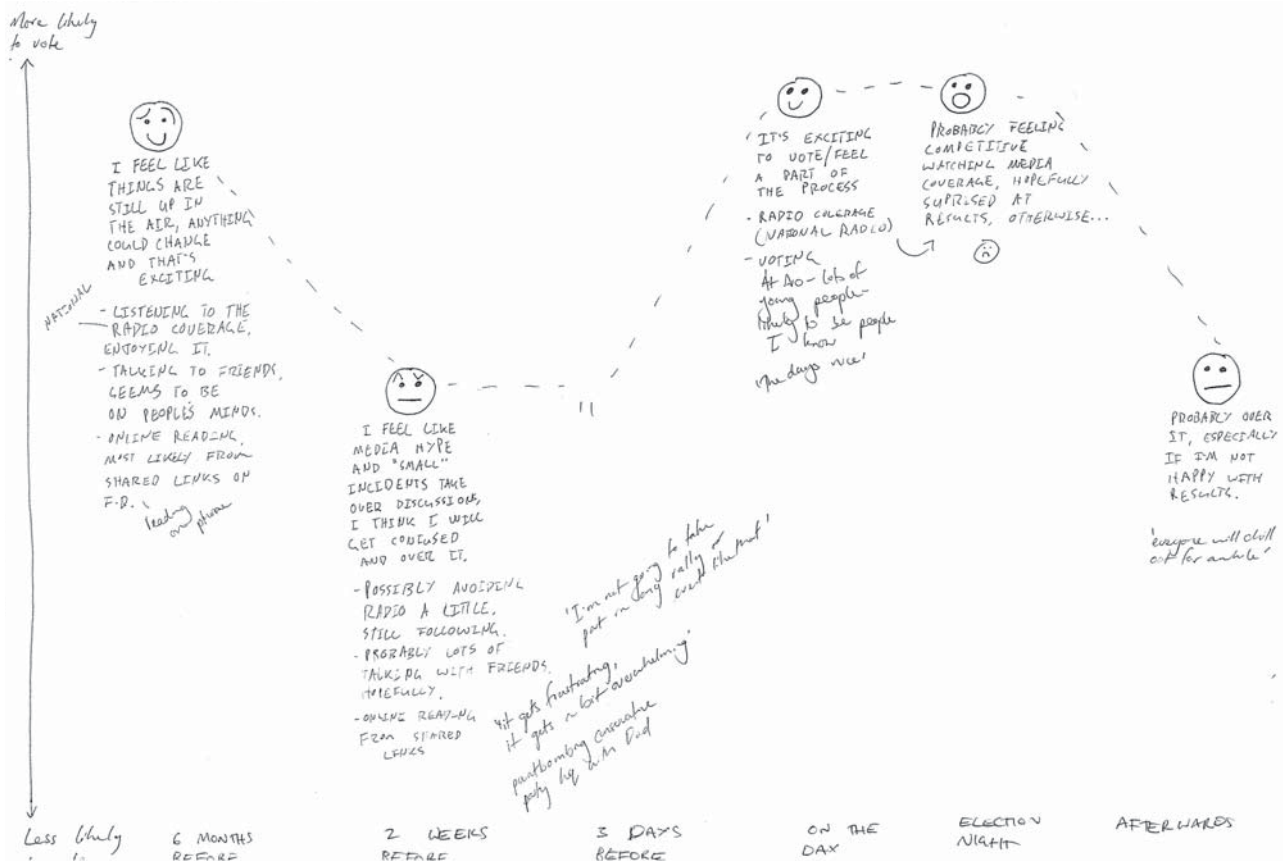
*hometown — all participants were students in Wellington



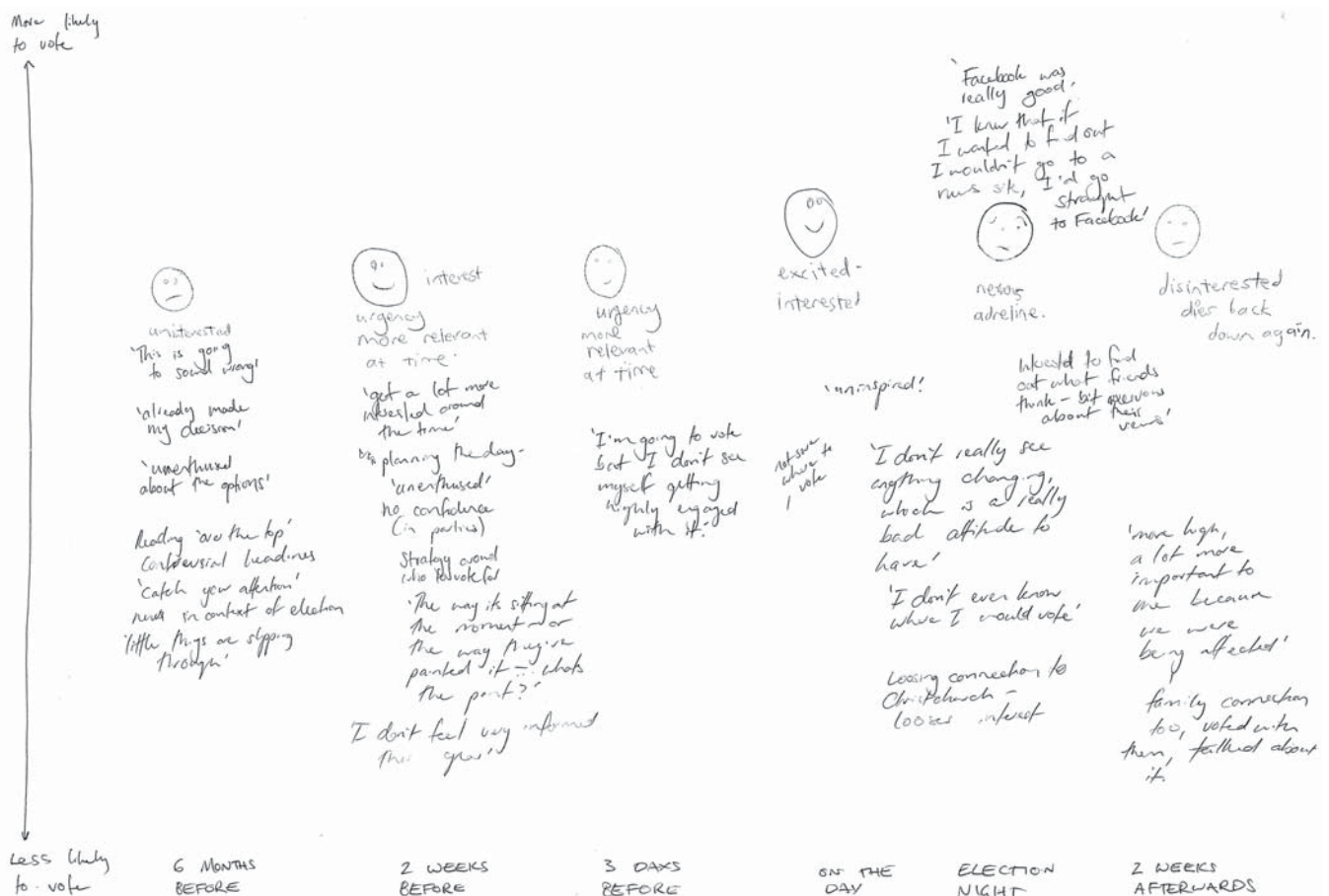
22 yrs, female, Pakeha, Christchurch



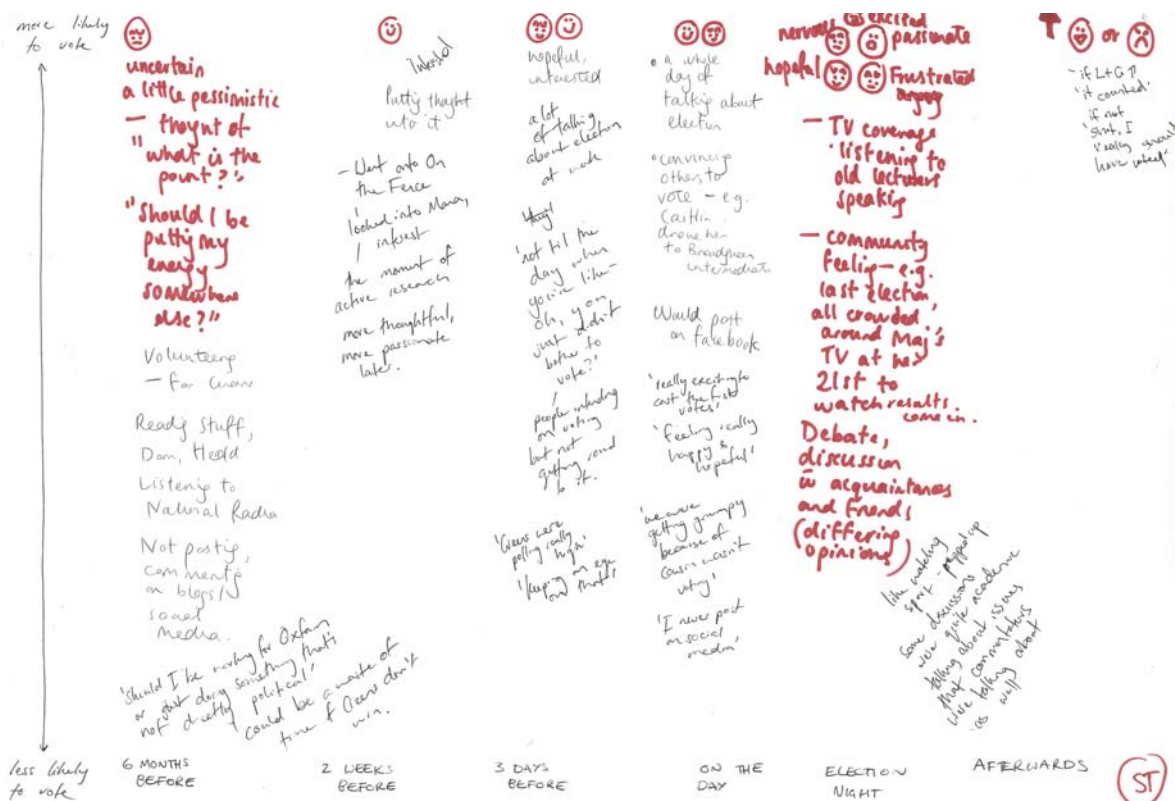
24 yrs, male, Pakeha, Lower Hutt



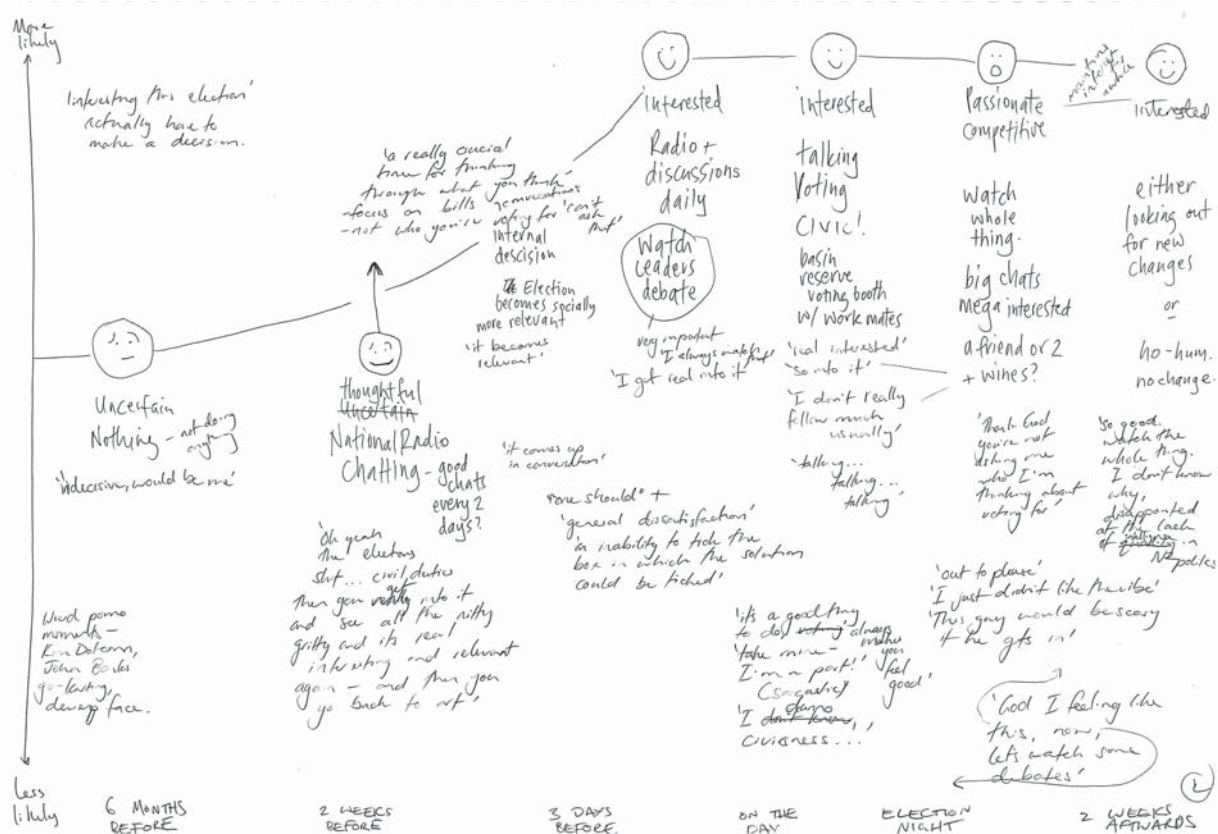
23 yrs, male, Pakeha, Palmerston North



22 yrs, female, Pakeha, Christchurch



23 yrs, female, Pakeha, Ngatimoti



24 yrs, female, Pakeha, Napier

Appendix Four: User testing script

Design Q+A — Visitor

1. User begins on home page
 - a. What do you think this is?
 - b. Observe actions
 - c. What are these (list of questions)?
 - d. What do these numbers mean?
 - e. What can you do on this page? How do you do it?
 - f. Ask them if there is anything that is confusing
2. How would you vote for a question?
3. How would you see an answer?
 - a. What do you expect to see if you click more?
4. What else can you do?
 - a. How would you get back to the home-page?
5. How would you post your own question?
 - a. What will you expect to happen after you submit your questions? (what will you see next, etc.)
6. What content do you want to see? (most popular, category, answered)
 - a. can you find it?
7. Is there anything else you want to do on this site? Does it do what you expect it to?
 - a. What do you want to know in the about section?
8. Who do you think this website is for?
9. Show Facebook share of site, see what they think

Five user testing sessions were carried out informally with students in the College of Creative Arts. Participants were shown the website and asked to think aloud as they used it. Some students were asked to imagine they were candidates, as it was not possible to run sessions with candidates.

Design Q+A — Candidate

1. Candidate begins in email and clicks link to question
 - a. Observe actions
2. What do you want to do now?
3. Go to home page
 - a. What are these (list of questions)?
 - b. What do these numbers mean?
 - c. What can you do on this page? How do you do it?
 - d. Ask them about if they would change anything
4. How would people vote for a question?
5. How would you see an answer?
 - a. What do you expect to see if you click more?
6. What else can you do?
 - a. How would you get back to the home-page?
 - b. Where would you find information about your party?
7. How would people post their own questions?
 - a. What will you expect to happen after you submit your questions? (what will you see next, etc.)
8. What content do you want to see? (most popular, category, answered)
 - a. can you find it?
9. Is there anything else you want to do on this site? Does it do what you expect it to?
 - a. What do you want to know in the about section?
10. Who do you think this website is for?
11. Show Facebook post

Appendix Five: Research participant demographics

Workshop participants

Gender	Timelines	Personas	Card sort	Age	Ethnicity	Hometown
F	x			23	Pakeha	Ngatimoti
M	x			23	Pakeha	Palmerston North
F	x	x	x	22	Pakeha	Christchurch
F	x			24	Pakeha	Napier
F	x			22	Pakeha	Christchurch
M	x	x	x	23	Pakeha	Gisbourne
M	x	x	x	23	Pakeha	Auckland
M		x	x	22	Pakeha	Lower Hutt
M			x	24	Pakeha	Lower Hutt
M			x	26	Asian	Lower Hutt
M			X	25	Maori	Lower Hutt

Survey respondents

Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Hometown
M	20	Filipino	Quezon City
F	19	Pakeha	Tauranga
F	19	Pakeha	New Plymouth
M	20	NZ/Chinese	Johnsonville
F	19	Pakeha	Lower Hutt
F	20	Pakeha	Napier
M	20	Pakeha	Tauranga
M	19	Pakeha	Christchurch
F	19	Pakeha	Marton
F	21	Pakeha	Hamilton
M	19	Ethiopian	Christchurch
F	19	Pakeha	Keri Keri
F	21	Brazilian	Hastings

38% Male, 62% Female

53% 19

69% Pakeha

Appendix Six: Invitation letter to parties

These authorisations were collected from all nine participating parties.



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF CREATIVE ARTS
TOI RAUWHĀRANGI

16 May, 2014

Tēnā koe Helen,

We are writing on behalf of Massey University's newly established *Design & Democracy Lab* to invite you to participate in our initiatives to increase youth voter turnout in this year's General Election. The *Design & Democracy Lab* is a strategic research unit within Massey University's College of Creative Arts exploring the role that design and design thinking have to play in dealing with social issues. We are focused on further developing and launching two concept proven online voter facilitation web tools, *On the Fence* and *Ask Away* for New Zealand's General Election.

On the Fence is an accessible non-partisan political values questionnaire that takes the form of an online game. Users match their personal views with statements on key policy areas and topics, and the web tool guides the user to the parties that are most compatible with their ethos and values. This helps those who feel unsure make an informed start to a life of democratic participation. In the five days from its launch on 21 November (General Election 26 November) onthefence.co.nz attracted 33,686 visits with 29,335 unique visitors.

Ask Away is a question and answer platform encouraging youth to set their own political agenda. Users are able to ask questions and up-vote (endorse) the questions of others they believe are important. These questions are regularly presented to candidates, allowing them to demonstrate responsiveness and commitment to their constituents' concerns. In the 24 days from its launch on 18 September (Local Body Election 12 October) askaway.co.nz attracted 4,231 visits with 2,725 unique visitors.

Both projects closely integrate with social media, as a means of reaching youth and as a mechanism to make political conversation visible. This reinforces the social norm of political engagement through young people's social networks and communities. As these initiatives are aimed at facilitating an increase in youth voter turnout, there are obvious benefits for parties who engage with these projects.

The Electoral Commission consider the projects proposed by Massey University's *Design & Democracy Lab* possess "the potential to positively impact on voter engagement during this election year, operating independent of the Commission, but in concert with its ethos and values."

The Māori Party agreed to participate in *On the Fence* (2011) and we are seeking to refresh this partnership. We are excited about the potential of these projects to impact on voter participation this year and believe they will offer valuable means of connecting with young voters. If you would like to participate, please sign and return the attached authorisation letters. We would also appreciate the chance to meet with you to demonstrate these initiatives. These projects are overseen by Karl Kane, Lecturer at Massey University College of Creative Arts. If you have any questions please feel free to contact him at k.kane@massey.ac.nz.

Kia ora mai,

Kieran Stowers *MDes* (Distinction)
Junior Research Officer

Meg Howie *BDes* (Hons)
Master of Design Candidate

Te Kunenga
ki Pūrehuroa

College of Creative Arts
PO Box 756, Wellington 6140, New Zealand T 04 801 5799 E creative@massey.ac.nz <http://creative.massey.ac.nz>



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF CREATIVE ARTS
TOI RAUWHĀRANGI

Authorisation of participation

Ask Away

Massey University's newly established *Design & Democracy Lab* to invite you to participate in increasing youth voter turnout in this year's General Election—in particular, with a concept proven online voter facilitation web tool: *Ask Away*.

Ask Away is a question and answer web platform encouraging youth set their own political agenda. Users are able to ask questions and up-vote (endorse) the questions of others they believe are important. These questions are regularly presented to party candidates, allowing them to demonstrate responsiveness and commitment to their constituents' concerns.

Each day, *Ask Away* will send the question with the highest number of votes to each party. The question will be categorised with a topic (e.g. 'Housing') and assigned to the party spokesperson/representative responsible for the given topic.

Party representatives will then have an opportunity to provide *Ask Away* users a concise answer to these questions within two days. Representatives are also able to answer additional questions on the site as they choose to, by logging into the *Ask Away* dashboard. Party representatives will also have the option to refer questions on to others within their party if they are unable to answer for any reason.

To satisfy Electoral Commission regulations, each party is required to attach authorisation for any responses from its representatives with the following statement:

Authorised By _____ (Name) Signed _____
Of _____ (Address) Date _____

On behalf of the Māori Party of New Zealand, we agree to participate in the *Ask Away* project as outlined in your letter 16 May, 2014.

Signed _____ Date _____

Please sign and return this letter by post or email to the *Design & Democracy Lab*, Massey University College of Creative Arts:

Post: PO Box 756
Wellington, 7140
Scan/Email: k.stowers@massey.ac.nz



Te Kunenga
ki Pūrehuroa

College of Creative Arts
PO Box 756, Wellington 6140, New Zealand T 04 801 5799 E creative@massey.ac.nz <http://creative.massey.ac.nz>

Appendix Seven: Invitation email to parties

Kia ora Louisa Wall!

Andrew Burns has invited you to answer questions on behalf of the Labour Party on the website *Ask Away*, and there is a question about community services that needs your answer. If you can answer within the next couple of days your answer will get maximum exposure.

Please login with this unique invitation link:

<http://nzelection.askaway.org.nz/invitations/Y7B4Vm66m9xmwowR6-QKYQ>

And give a short answer to this question:

[Can you provide secure funding of community services and protect their right to provide commentary and advocacy on Government policy?](#)

What is *Ask Away*?

Ask Away is a website where Kiwis ask the parties questions during the election, and you can answer them on behalf of your party. *Ask Away* is part of Massey University's Design and Democracy Project, which aims to facilitate youth engagement in the 2014 General Election.

Which questions should you answer?

You can answer any question you like. Just bear in mind that your party can only give one answer to each question, so think about whether you're the best person from your party to be answering.

We'll email you if there are really popular questions you need to answer. Depending on how many people in your party are answering questions, you can expect to get one or two reminder emails per week. Your party secretary has authorised any content you post to the site.

If you have any questions, free to email me, meg@askaway.org.nz, or call me with any questions.

Warm regards,

Meg Howie

0274418072

Appendix Eight: Engagement before and after survey

Ask Away Election Survey

1.Name:

Age:

Ethnicity:

Hometown:

2. Is politics interesting?

1	2	3	4
No never	Sometimes	Often	Always

3. Is politics easy to understand?

1	2	3	4
No never	Sometimes	Often	Always

4. Do you think voting can make a difference?

1	2	3	4
No never	Sometimes	Often	Always

5. Have you talked to your friends and/or family about the elections?

1	2	3	4
No never	Sometimes	Often	Always

6. How likely are you to vote in this election?

1	2	3	4
Not at all	Somewhat	Quite likely	Very likely

7. Do you think politicians care what you have to say?

1	2	3	4
No never	Sometimes	Often	Always

8. How relevant is this election to you?

1	2	3	4
Not at all	Somewhat	Quite	Very relevant

Note: The following questions were only asked on the 'after' survey

9. Did you visit the Ask Away site?

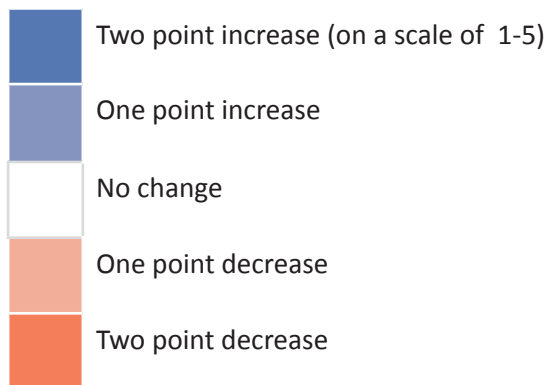
- Yes
- No

10. If yes, did you do any of the following?

- Read questions
- Read answers
- Upvote a question
- Ask a question

Any comments/feedback on the Ask Away website?

Appendix Nine: Before and after survey results



Before: 11 September 2014

	Are politics interesting?	Easy to understand?	Does your vote make a difference?	Have you talked to friends & family?	How likely are you to vote?	Do you think politicians care what you say?	Are politics relevant to you?
Visited AA							
1	3	2	4	2	1	2	3
2	2	1.5	4	3	4	1	1
3	1	2	2	3	1	1	1
4	2	1	4	3	2	2	4
5	2	2	3	2	3	2	2
6	2	1	2	3	2	2	2
7	3	2	3	3	4	2	2
8	2	2	3	4	3	2	4
9	2	1	2	2	2	1	3
Didn't visit AA							
10	4	3	3	4	2	1	2
11	1	1	2	3	2	1	2
12	2	2	2	3	2	1	1
13	2	1	2	1	2	2	2

After: 18 September 2014

	Are politics interesting?	Easy to understand?	Does your vote make a difference?	Have you talked to friends & family?	How likely are you to vote?	Do you think politicians care what you say?	Are politics relevant to you?
Visited AA							
1	3	2	4	3	1	4	4
2	1	1.5	4	4	4	1	1
3	2	2	2	3	1	1	1
4	3	2	4	4	4	3	4
5	3	1	3	3	3	2	2
6	3	3	2	4	3	2	3
7	3	2	4	3	4	2	2
8	2	2	3	4	4	2	4
9	2	1	3	3	3	1	3
Didn't visit AA							
10	2	2	4	3	4	2	2
11	1	1	2	4	2	1	2
12	3	1	3	4	3	2	2
13	1	1	2	2	2	1	2

Appendix Ten: Participant information sheet

Ask Away



Information Sheet

My name is Meg Howie and I am working on a website that will make it easy for young people in New Zealand to ask the candidates questions in the general election. This is my Master of Design project at Massey University's College of Creative Arts.

I am doing some research to measure whether using the website has an effect on young people's political engagement. I hope to talk to around twenty 18-24 year olds and am offering a small token of my appreciation to thank you for taking part. The purpose of this study is to do a before and after comparison using the same questions as the Electoral Commission use in schools to measure attitudes towards elections.

If at any point you wish to withdraw from the study, please email me at howiemeg@gmail.com and I will delete your data.

Project Procedures

If you're happy to take part, there is a short survey to do online now about your attitudes towards the election. Then we will look at the website, Ask Away, and I will ask you to make an account.

In a few days time, I will email you a reminder to have another look at the website, and then once more a few days after that. In one week, I will send the follow up survey, which will be the same questions as the first one. At that point, you will be offered the chance to do a follow up interview, but that is entirely optional.

Time: 20 mins altogether

Data Management

I will use the information I gather to evaluate the effectiveness of the website. I will publish the summarised findings in my thesis, but not personally identifiable data. If you provide additional comments I may use quotes with your first name and age. I may also use data and quotes when presenting the work in the future, and in publicity for the website.

All of the data I gather will be kept and stored in my possession. Please email me at howiemeg@gmail.com if you would like to be sent a summary of the findings.

Participant's Rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

decline to answer any particular question;

withdraw from the study at any time;

ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;

provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;

be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.

Project Contacts

Researcher:

Meg Howie

Email: howiemeg@gmail.com

Supervisor:

Karl Kane

Email: k.kane@massey.ac.nz

Please contact either of us if you have any questions or wish to withdraw your information.

Low Risk Ethics Notification

"This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Professor John O'Neill, Director, Research Ethics, telephone 06 350 5249, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz".

Appendix Eleven: Participant consent sheet

Ask Away

Participant Consent Form

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded

I agree/do not agree to the interview being image recorded.

I agree/do not agree to images being published on the project's website, blog and social media.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature _____

Date _____

Full Name (printed) _____

Appendix Twelve: Kids Vote survey

This is the survey the Electoral Commission uses to judge the effects of its “Kids Vote” programme, where children participate in mock elections in schools. Students complete another survey afterwards.

KIDS VOTING EVALUATION FORM - to be completed BEFORE the elections



The aim of Kids Voting is to increase your understanding of, and participation in, electoral and democratic process.

To work out whether we are achieving our aim, we need you help.

Please read the questions below and circle the number that most represents how you feel.

	NO NEVER	SOMETIMES	OFTEN	YES ALWAYS
1. Is politics interesting?	1	2	3	4
2. Are elections easy to understand?	1	2	3	4
3. Do you think voting can make a difference?	1	2	3	4
4. Have you talked to your family about the elections?	1	2	3	4
5. When you turn 18 and are eligible to vote, will you?	1	2	3	4

Please circle below the services you think Parliament delivers:

Libraries	Produces dairy products	Schools	Appoints the Governor General	Collects taxes
Police	Hospitals	Provides gas & electricity to houses	Public transport	Rubbish collection

Appendix Thirteen: Letters from candidates

To Whom It May Concern,

As New Zealand First Deputy Leader and Spokesperson for Communications and IT I was nominated by the Board of Directors of New Zealand First to be the Parties policy voice on the new initiative “*Ask Away*”. This platform proved invaluable over the course of the 2014 election by allowing New Zealand First, along with other political parties, to identify the issues of concern to the voting public and to put forward, in a concise manner, our answer to those concerns.

It is widely recognised that to gain traction inside main stream media one often has to create a “gottcha point” in order for this to be considered “sexy” enough for reporting. This coupled with the persistence of the “first past the post — there are only two parties” type of reporting means that initiatives such as “*Ask Away*” are vital to a truly MMP environment.

If New Zealand wishes to have a continually evolving representative democracy then it will require support for sites such as “*Ask Away*” through the three year period in between elections. After all politics doesn’t stop between elections so why should the ability to ask questions of political parties?

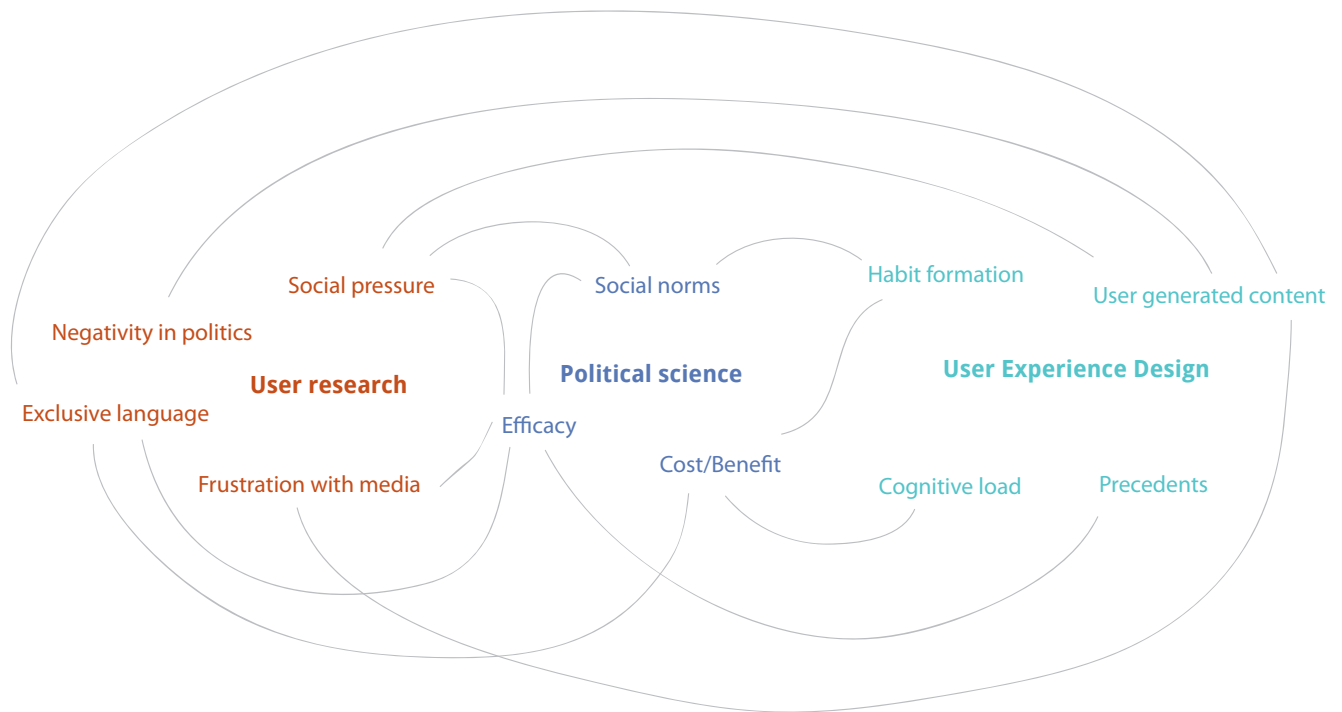
I hope that any application for resourcing by the creators of “*Ask Away*” will be looked upon favourably as a method to engage New Zealanders of all ages and demographics in the decisions that affect their lives and their nation.

Tracey Martin,
Deputy Leader,
New Zealand First.

The Green party strongly supports good civics education and our team really enjoyed participating in AskAway during the election period, so we will be very happy to continue to participate in an adapted version to be used as a resource for schools to use in civics/ citizenship education. Our political participation rates are far too low and we clearly more initiatives to help inform and connect people with their political representatives. I think this is a great initiative.

Jan Logie, MP

Appendix Fourteen: Connections



This diagram shows the connections I found between different fields of inquiry. Design research offers a framework for recognising patterns across material drawn from different sources.

Appendix Fifteen: Social media posts

